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June 29, 1892.

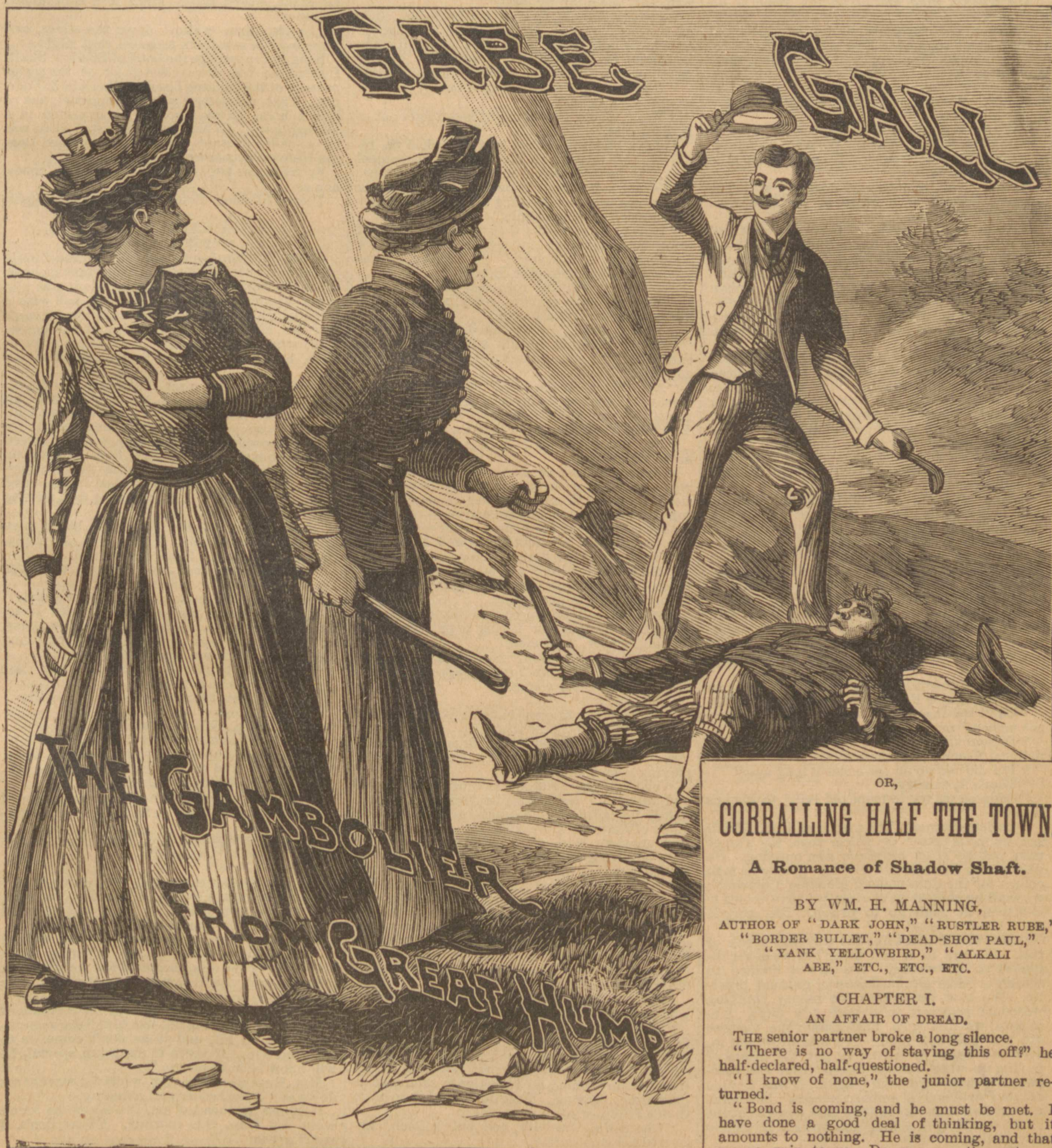
No. 714.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LV.



OR, CORRALLING HALF THE TOWN.

A Romance of Shadow Shaft.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "DARK JOHN," "RUSTLER RUBE,"
"BORDER BULLET," "DEAD-SHOT PAUL,"
"YANK YELLOWBIRD," "ALKALI
ABE," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN AFFAIR OF DREAD.

THE senior partner broke a long silence.
"There is no way of staving this off?" he
half-declared, half-questions.
"I know of none," the junior partner re-
turned.
"Bond is coming, and he must be met. I
have done a good deal of thinking, but it
amounts to nothing. He is coming, and that
means ruin to us. Do you see the gates of
prison opening for you, Fearing?"
"It may not be so bad as that."

REMOVING HIS HAT GABE MADE A DEEP BOW AND SMILED UPON THE WOMEN IN THE
PARTY LIKE A TRUE GALLANT.

"What more can we expect? It won't take him long to learn we have been false to our trust, and after that the race will be a short one. We shall be sent up for a term, the length of which is not a matter of interest to me. I care more for the disgrace!"

"If we could only dispose of Philemon Bond in some way!"

The senior partner had been looking in the drawer in front of him. He now took out a revolver and laid it down on the desk. It may have been only chance, but the act came at a moment when it carried a suggestion. If they could only dispose of Philemon Bond! Leland Sherwin sat looking at the revolver for some time in silence, while Ward Fearing as attentively watched him.

Finally the senior partner went on with his work. He took out a roll of papers.

"Here is the damning evidence!" he proceeded. "It will show that we, Sherwin & Fearing, agents for the Consolidated Banking Company, should now have a large sum of money to turn in to our superiors. We *should* have, but we have not. Where has it gone? Why, it's the old story; we have speculated with what was not ours, and now we have got to take the consequences, which means, be everlastingly disgraced, and go to the State's Prison!"

"You put the prison part last."

"Because I regard it as a trivial matter in comparison with the shame of what must precede it. It is horrible!"

The speaker rose and paced the room in an excited way.

"Maybe our superiors would overlook our indiscretion," suggested Fearing, slowly.

"Vain hope! You ought to know that; their reputation is not for that sort of thing; they exact every cent, and on time. Why should they not? Would not you or I demand honesty in our employees?"

"We did not intend to be dishonest."

"Don't be foolish, Ward. We were dishonest, and that's the whole story. Now we must take the consequences."

He sat down in a sort of dogged way. The partners looked each other in the face with frowning attention.

Outside the murmur of business went on. The town, which, after the fashion of the West, bore the unique name of Shadow Shaft, was yet young, but it was a place of no small importance. Successful from the first, it had grown until a good business was done there. Gold-mining went on with vigor, but other industries had sprung up and made the trade more general and noted.

Over one office door hung the sign of the men already introduced to notice. It announced that Sherwin and Fearing were the agents at Shadow Shaft for the Consolidated Banking Company. This was a concern of some note in the West. Composed of men of means, branches had been started at various points, and a business was done through a large section which was paying the capitalists a goodly return on their investments.

Leland Sherwin and Major Ward Fearing were in charge at Shadow Shaft, as before said. They had come there when the mining-town was but small, and had grown up with the place. No one there had grown any faster than Sherwin. Popular as a man, and trusted as a business person, he had become the first citizen of Shadow Shaft without any effort on his part.

The people had delighted to honor him with offices of trust, in addition to his private enterprises, and, though not yet thirty-two years old, he was a power in all things appertaining to the place.

Visions of this flitted through his mind as he sat facing Major Fearing in the office, this day.

"Can't we make one more attempt to raise the money?" asked Fearing, after a pause.

"Do you know of any one who will loan?" demanded Sherwin, apathetically.

"If I did we would have had it long ago."

"That's it, exactly."

"Suppose we try to bribe old Bond to give us time?"

"Useless scheme! The man is of iron. I will not say he is better or worse than the run of men, but he is as obstinate as a bull-dog. He will come; he will ask for the money he is to collect for the Consolidated Banking Company; we shall be obliged to confess we have stolen it and then we shall go to prison. The story is short if not sweet!"

"Sherwin, I don't like the way you speak of this. We are in a bad hole, but we never intended to do wrong. We saw a chance to speculate under circumstances of unusual promise. We took the company's money, thinking we could return it in a very few days. Unluckily, we met with misfortune; the venture did not pan out good. We lost all we put in. Then we began to hustle to get the means of paying up what we had taken from the company's funds. Unluckily, again, it was a time of general financial embarrassment. We have not succeeded in borrowing, and now the agent of the company is coming and we have no money to give him."

"The old story!" murmured Sherwin, dully.

"But I say we were not dishonest."

"Say it, if 'twill do you any good."

"We thought we could pay what we took, and—"

"You talk like a child! What knave ever failed to make the same plea for pardon? Imagine old Philemon Bond listening to such a childishly foolish excuse! His grim face would be a living sneer. Ward Fearing, I, for one, shall make no excuse whatever. I shall just confess and let Bond haul us away to jail!"

"You talk as if you like the prospect."

"Like it!" echoed Sherwin. "Like to see all my hopes, honors and friends swept away at one breath? Gods! it seems as if I should go mad with horror! Like it! Death would be sweet in comparison to it!"

He picked up the revolver.

"Surely you would not use that!" Fearing exclaimed. "Suicide is never to be thought of by a brave man—"

"Rest easy; I have no intention of doing any such thing. I expect to face the consequences of my folly and my sin. It will come soon; Bond is due here in an hour."

"How shall you meet him?"

"With an immediate statement of the facts. I want to have it over with as soon as possible."

"Don't do that. You know he never talks business out of business hours, and he gets here after all places are closed. We have a reprieve of the night, and there is one chance out of a hundred that we may get the money from some source by the morning mail."

"That is possible, though not probable, since all to whom we have applied have been unable to help us out. Still, with one's honor at stake he cannot be too prudent. I will meet Bond as usual, and see what the night will bring forth."

"It seems hard to be knocked out by a fellow as unfeeling as he."

"Yes. Some people might seek to get out of it, I suppose."

Leland Sherwin cocked and uncocked the revolver. He seemed to do this in a mechanical way. If he had ideas of importance in his mind he did not make them known. Still, a revolver was a suggestive plaything for one confessedly on the eve of financial ruin.

"It is to be regretted that we ever thought of using the company's money," remarked Major Fearing, in a low voice. "I believe it was you who first suggested it, Leland?"

The senior partner regarded his companion steadfastly before making reply, and his gaze appeared stern and accusing.

"Yes; it was I," he confessed, coldly.

"True," Fearing added, with some embarrassment. "I also thought the plan worthy of adoption."

"As I remember the facts," responded Leland, slowly, "I chanced to observe that if we had the use of the company's money we could get rich. You very promptly urged that we take it—"

"No, no; not urged; only agreed," hastily amended Fearing.

A sarcastic smile crossed Sherwin's face. It was a fact that when he referred to the possibilities if they had the money of the company, Fearing had taken the matter up and so harped upon it that his senior in the house of Sherwin & Fearing had finally consented. Leland knew very well that it was the junior partner's urging that had led to the mischief, but he could see no good reason why, in that hour, the rogues in the case should indulge in quarreling.

Not once had he reproached his companion, yet the latter was now trying to put the blame on him, wholly, it seemed.

"I will go home now," remarked the major, after a pause. "I can do you no good by being around when Bond comes."

"None at all."

"I hope you will come out all right with him."

"I think I know how to act."

Again Leland raised the hammer of the revolver. He seemed to have a morbid fancy for playing with the weapon.

Ward Fearing went out looking embarrassed and unhappy. He met men outside who wanted to ask his advice in business matters, for the house of Sherwin & Fearing stood so high that such matters were often referred to them by their admiring fellow-citizens. The major gave advice now, but his heart was not in the work. He would much rather have found some one who could help him out of his own difficulties.

How Leland Sherwin passed the time until the arrival of the stage from Rooster Run only himself knew, for he was not seen until the hour for that daily conveyance to arrive. He met it, then, and no one noticed that he was in a mood different from usual.

From the stage alighted a man who had grown well known at Shadow Shaft.

"Old Bond, the home agent of the banking firm," remarked Caleb Carter, a miner. "Say, ef they want ter make money they had better set old Fatty to work, an' not hev him waste time runnin' around ter investigate such men as Sherwin & Fearing. They don't need it no more than a babby needs a toothpick!"

"Oh! it's all friendly, and only a form," answered a second miner.

"I know, but it's so ridick'lous, ye see!"

Caleb Carter thought he saw, at least.

Sometimes men are mistaken.

Philemon Bond was a man of middle age. He looked somewhat like a sea-captain. He was big and brawny, and as rough of form and face as a pine knot. While he was not strictly of the over-fleshy order, he was plumper than most persons care to be, and so much muscle had been given him, and such a breadth of shoulders, that he looked bigger than he was, really.

His face was broad and round, and red of color. It was smooth shaven with the exception of a fringe of red along his ears, this style giving him a very English appearance. He was a bluff, rather coarse person who passed as a very blunt, honest man of commonplace tastes.

He and Sherwin met with the usual show of good will.

"I'm glad to get here!" declared Philemon. "This stage grows more atrocious every time I ride. I am going to ask our people to build a railroad this way. It would do me good, if no-body else. As to the others, I don't care. It's every one for himself in this world. Don't you think so, Sherwin?"

"Where should we come to if that doctrine was followed to the extreme?"

"Well, I fancy I should come to comfort, if I was able to get what I want," Bond bluntly responded. "I am tired of going like a snail over these ridges. Give me a railroad and I would look after you more carefully, Sherwin, you dog! Some comfort in being an inspector, then. Now, I come all this way and find you all right, every time. I call it a confounded nuisance!"

The two men walked down the street, and those outside saw them no more, that night.

Bond never went to the hotel of Shadow Shaft. Instead, he was always the guest of the senior partner of the banking house of Sherwin & Fearing. That gentleman was not married, but he had a home of rank not to be expected in a mining-town. Of this place his sister Ruth was the so-called mistress, and a woman named Dorcas Huse was housekeeper.

Between the two it had been made a model home.

There Philemon Bond was to spend the night.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE MORNING.

JOHN BROWN, colored servant in the family of Leland Sherwin, had an important niche to fill in the running of that house. He it was who every morning rung the breakfast bell with a force which was the envy of his fellow servants and the horror of the members of the household, who would gladly have enjoyed more sleep, but were prevented by the clamor of the bell.

On the morning after Philemon Bond's arrival at the house, John Brown rung with his usual zeal. Then he took some hot water, a little sugar and some accessories and started for the room occupied by the distinguished guest. As a preventive of ills the flesh is heir to, Mr. Bond each morning took a specially prepared drink of whisky and other things, and John Brown never lost anything by serving him.

On arriving at the door the black man knocked deferentially. There was no reply. He knocked again. Silence continued.

"Queer!" murmured John Brown. "I never knew him to sleep so sound before."

Twice more he knocked, but without result.

Just then along the hall came Dorcas Huse, the housekeeper—a woman of some fifty years, tall and slender, but possessed of strength and health many a person might have envied.

"Say, wasn't Mr. Bond put in here, last night?" asked John Brown.

"Yes," Dorcas returned.

"He don't answer me."

"He's asleep. Knock again."

"I've knocked again several times, already."

"He's tired, stupid, and don't wake up easy. Take this key and go in. He never would forgive us if we let him oversleep."

Furnished with the key John Brown opened the door. When he did so he stood in mute surprise.

"Well," questioned Mrs. Huse, from a distance, "what is it, stupid?"

"He ain't here!"

The housekeeper came back with quick steps.

"You would not see a mountain if it was here, though you would see a tip if it was as small as the end of your conscience."

With this sweeping statement Dorcas walked in, but if she expected to see Philemon Bond bidden away she was disappointed. As the black man had said, the inspector was not there. She looked more puzzled than John Brown.

"Old Bond may have gone out for a breath of fresh air, though it is not like him," she remarked. "Wait a bit, and if he don't come, go to Mr. Sherwin. If there is anything special, he will know of it, of course."

Mrs. Huse went her way, while the servant sat down and looked sober and unhappy.

"Ef he's up ahead o' me, I'm afraid he won't want my help, this mornin'. Ef he don't, I won't get no tip!"

And the black man grew more serious.

Time passed. Philemon did not appear. John

Brown looked out of the window. He could not see the missing man there.

"Mortal funny!" he muttered.

He decided to go to his master, and did so without delay. Leland had gone down-stairs and was in the parlor. The servant entered without knocking, and found Sherwin sitting in a position so peculiar that he was surprised anew. Leaning his elbow upon the table, he had his head resting on his hand, and the whole attitude was one of deep dejection.

"Be you ill, sir?" demanded John Brown, quickly.

"Ill? No; why do you ask?"

"You look all broke up, if I may express it so."

"Keep your expressions to yourself!"

John Brown was dazed. Never before had his master spoken thus sharply to him, and he did not know what to make of it. Leland saw the effect he had produced and hastened to add:

"Excuse me, John. I spoke thoughtlessly. I believe I am ill."

"Is Mr. Bond that way, too?"

"Bond? What of him?"

"I can't find him."

"Can't find him?"

"No, sir."

"Isn't he in his room?"

"No; he ain't, an' that's jest what puzzles me. I went up as I always do, but not a sign o' him did I see. He wa'n't there, an' I don't know where he is. I've waited a good bit, but he don't show up."

John Brown had a taste for the marvelous, and he began to think there was something really mysterious in the affair, but Leland took it coolly.

"No doubt he will be in directly."

"He never has gone out like this before, sir. He's a hustler in the daytime, but he do like his bed in the mornin' as well as any one I ever heard of."

Leland was surprised, himself, that Bond should thus be absent, if his growing expression of uncertainty was anything to judge by, but he once more remarked:

"He will show up soon enough."

They waited, but Philemon did not come. The breakfast grew cold, and all who were to eat were there but the one missing man. Conjectures were exchanged as to the reason of his absence, but this did not bring him back.

After awhile it occurred to John Brown that a more careful search of the room might be a good thing. He went up accordingly.

Almost the first thing he saw was Mr. Bond's trousers hanging over the back of a chair.

The black man's eyes grew large. Bond might have gone out for a morning walk, but he would hardly have gone without the important accessories.

"Bless me!" John Brown muttered.

Recovering his wits, he ran down-stairs and impetuously imparted the new discovery. He made an impression. Trowsers and men were supposed to be constant companions in the daytime, and the separation in the present case was not explainable in any ordinary way.

The policy of waiting was abandoned, and John Brown was sent out to see if Philemon had been seen with or without his wardrobe. Those who remained ate their breakfast and wondered.

When the messenger returned he brought no news. He had gone around with his eyes open, he asserted, but without result. He had not seen Bond, or heard of him in any way. There seemed nothing to do but to take matters calmly and await the return of the inspector, which Leland was perfectly willing to do.

He went to his office and found Fearing already there. The junior partner smiled wisely.

"Bond is not with you?" he remarked.

"No."

"I take it you have got him out of the way?"

"Eh?"

"I have heard of his disappearance."

"What do you think of it?"

"Simply that you have done a good job!"

"What do you mean?"

"When I heard he was missing I fancied I knew how to account for the fact."

"How do you do it?"

"I am not a clod. I am wise enough to see you have put a dangerous man out of the way in some fashion; how, I don't care."

Leland frowned.

"Do you mean to insinuate I have had any part in his disappearance?"

"What else am I to think?"

"Anything you please, except what you intimate. I know nothing about his going, nor where he now is. He went just as I have told all to whom I have spoken. He went to bed in my house. This morning he was not there. Further than that I know nothing. Did you think I had done him mischief?"

Leland put the question with some asperity, but Fearing answered quite calmly:

"I knew not; I care not, so long as he does not harm us."

"I am no assassin!" asserted Leland, with warmth.

"My dear sir, I did not say you were, and

even if it was so, I fancy I could hear the news with more or less composure. Bond was in our way. Should I grieve because he went out of it with dispatch? I must say I should not. Anyhow, I am glad he is gone."

"Not so fast. Don't flatter yourself the danger is over; he will reappear. Of course he has gone of his own free will. I have not done him harm, and that any one else could come in and spirit him out of sight is not to be thought of. He may have gone for the most trivial of reasons. He will come back. We are not to have the good luck of being free from our peril thus. I don't want to be. What should we gain by it? Another man would come to investigate in his place, and it would be all the harder for us if we had a mysterious disappearance to account for. Don't you see that?"

"But the delay might give us time to get the money to help us out."

Leland started and looked at his partner more earnestly.

"That's a fact," he agreed, after a long pause.

"We can stand it if Bond don't come!"

The senior partner meditated for some time. Then he replied:

"Don't give such thoughts a moment of notice. Bond will come. He has not been swallowed up like a rock in mid-ocean. We have got to see him again, and see him in a way we shall not like."

The partners regarded each other in silence for a moment. Fearing's face still bore that questioning expression, as if he was not wholly satisfied that he had heard the whole truth. If Leland read it he gave no heed. He soon turned to his work and made a pretense of engaging in it as usual. His hand shook, however, when he tried to hold up the papers he had to examine, and it was plain he was nervous.

An hour passed and Philemon Bond did not come. Two hours—three! Fearing more often glanced at his companion, but studiously refrained from commenting upon the affair. Now and then both looked nervous as some one came to the door, but it never was Bond. His shadow did not fall on the threshold.

Noon! Leland rose and put on his hat.

"I will be back at the usual time," he remarked, and walked out.

Fearing gazed after him wonderingly.

"Jove! but isn't he a cool one! He may make others believe he don't know where Bond is, but it won't go down with me. If there was not something done during the night I am no judge of cause, effect and signs!"

Sherwin went home. John Brown met him with a very serious face.

"Ain't he showed up?" the servant asked.

"If you mean Bond, he has not," serenely replied Leland.

"Don't you think it is strange?"

"Strange?" retorted the banker, sharply.

"What is there strange about it?"

"Why, the way he's gone. He may be murdered, sir!"

CHAPTER III.

AN UNINVITED WITNESS.

LELAND turned full upon his man, and with increased severity.

"Don't be a fool!" he commanded. "Don't you think Bond is able to care for himself?"

"I did think so, but I don't now," frankly answered John Brown. "It would be mortal funny, anyhow, and Dick Huse has that to tell which makes it all the more suspicious."

"Dick Huse had better mind his own business!"

"I've been as busy as I could, minding it."

With this comment another person sidled up toward the speakers in a half-timid way. He was Dick Huse.

Doreas, housekeeper for the Sherwin family, was the more or less proud mother of four sons. Of these, three lived elsewhere in the camp, but Richard—Dreamer Dick—had quarters in the house where his maternal parent reigned in her glory.

Richard was a young man of some peculiarities, and they were of such nature that many did not hesitate to pronounce him only half-witted. Others did not share in this opinion at all, for they knew he had qualities which no semi-idiot ever possessed. He was a reader, a scholar, a thinker and a conglomeration of geologist, botanist and other scientific things. This was Dreamer Dick.

He presented himself to Leland's notice; a slight youth who had a pale and gentle face.

"Yes," he added, "I've been busy. I knew it would hurt your feelings to have anything happen to Mr. Bond, so I've been searching a bit. The result has been such that I am fully justified in thinking there may be a mystery—a real, interesting mystery!" he added, with enthusiasm and solemnity, combined.

Leland gazed at the youth with set features. Mystery was dear to Richard's heart. He was always talking about it, and looking for it, but in his experience it had been hard to find. A less zealous person would ere that have become discouraged in the search. Not so Dreamer

Dick. He knew mystery did exist, somewhere, for he had heard of such things. He had been on the watch for a case for years; now, he thought he had run one down.

"Are you talking of bugs and weeds?" Leland finally asked, ungraciously.

"Bless me! no, sir; it's about Mr. Bond."

"And Dick says there's a mystery about him!" added John Brown, with some enthusiasm, himself.

"What have you to say, boy?" inquired Leland, slowly.

"There were strange goings on in this house last night, sir!" asserted Richard, wisely.

"What?"

"Did you hear nothing in Mr. Bond's room?"

"No. Did you?"

"I did."

"Don't be all day in telling of it!" impatiently advised John Brown. "Mr. Sherwin and I are business men, and we like to get right down to the facts of the case. Speak out!"

This seemed out of the question with Richard, who was in a mild fever of mystery, but after repeated urging from the colored man he got around to talk.

"I am not a sound sleeper," he remarked.

"When I waken in the night I get to thinking about the bugs, rocks and plants I know of, and it keeps me wakeful. It was so last night. While I was awake I heard sounds outside the house."

"It seemed to me something was trying to climb up the wall. I rose and looked out, but not a thing could I see. I believed I had imagined it all, and I went back to bed."

"Shortly after this I heard sounds in the house. It was in Mr. Bond's room, and like the falling over of a chair. I thought he was up, but as I had just been up myself I gave it no especial notice. Then I heard what was like a groan, and I decided he was ill. I did not like to be too obtrusive, so I did nothing about it for awhile, but I finally concluded that as he was our guest I ought to make sure he was not in need of my assistance."

"I went to his door and called his name."

"There was no answer so I called again. Then I heard a very distinct reply:

"Go to bed, fool!"

"I decided from this that he did not want my aid, and I went and did just what I was told. I went to bed, and I heard no more from there at all. I finally fell asleep, so if there was anything more of interest I did not hear it."

"All this made no impression on my mind until I heard Mr. Bond was missing; then a suspicion began to work in my mind. I don't believe it was Mr. Bond who made answer to me when I called to him!"

"Not Bond?"

Leland Sherwin had listened attentively, but had given no signs of wishing to interrupt until Richard made his surprising finish. Then the question seemed to spring from his lips in wonder—perhaps in a startled manner.

"I don't think it was," replied the youth.

"I thought it sounded queer for Mr. Bond, then, but that it could be any one else never occurred to me. Now I think the thing over carefully I am prepared to say it was not Mr. Bond who spoke!"

"He was alone."

"Some one may have come in when I heard the scratching outside the house, sir!"

"Nonsense!"

"I am sure there was a person there!" declared Richard, his pale face flushing a little with enthusiasm. "I am sure there is a mystery; a most attractive mystery, sir!"

"You are so beset with a desire to find mystery that you are of no earthly use," Leland fretfully exclaimed. "Do you think we live in the Dark Ages?"

"That is just about it!" returned Richard, with a fresh burst of enthusiasm. "We read about such things, and why should they not be now as well as in the old times? Maybe, Mr. Bond has gone to the thumb-screw, the rack and the place of quartering! What luck that would be!"

"Dick, the older you get the less you know, I do believe. You are wild and absurd."

"But it must be a mystery," persisted Richard, clinging to his pet hobby stoutly.

"I s'pose you didn't see nothin' familiar in the voice you heard in the room?" asked John Brown.

Richard looked thoughtfully at Sherwin. He was slow in making reply.

"That's just what perplexes me," he responded, after a pause. "I was in hopes Mr. Sherwin could throw light on the subject."

"How can I tell what you heard?" Leland curtly demanded.

"But you see, it sounded like *your* voice!" explained Richard.

"Thunder!" muttered John Brown.

"The more I think it over, the more reasonable it appears," added Dick, seriously. "It was just about the same kind of a voice, anyhow."

If Leland was troubled by the statement he did not betray the fact. He remained as calm as usual.

"It was not I, and you don't want to get any such idea into your mind," he cautioned. "Pretty

story it would be if you went and spread such an absurd account to the four winds of heaven. Or perhaps you have done it, already?"

He showed more interest, now, and his eyes questioned Dick's face even more sharply than his tongue did its share.

"No," replied the youth, calmly, "I have said nothing, yet. I thought it best to come to you, first."

"You did right, for I do not want any such absurd yarn to go out. You did not hear me, and it is not likely you heard any one except Bond himself. It is very easy to make a mistake. It was Bond, himself. Do you hear me?"

The banker appeared worried, and he made the last point with emphasis. He frowned upon Dick, too, as if trying to scare him into acquiescence with his own plans, but simple Dick answered:

"But how do you know it was Bond if you were not there?"

Leland's face flushed.

"I am not here to argue with you on a nonsensical theory. You dreamed all this, and I do not want to hear anything more about it. Do you understand?"

"Oh! yes; it is plain enough," responded the youth, unmoved by the sharp reproof.

"To whom have you told this yarn?"

"Only to you, sir."

"See to it you tell it no further. You are not the most brilliant man in Shadow Shaft, Dick. Take counsel of your superiors, and keep a still tongue in your head. You are all wrong. Get right by closing your mouth like a trap! See?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's all. You can go."

Richard went, accompanied by John Brown.

"You got set down on!" quoth the latter, with a grin.

"I think Mr. Sherwin must know where Mr. Bond is," answered Dick, wisely. "The way he spoke shows that. I am more observing than people think, John."

"Yes; you're as wise as an ostrich!" mocked the servant.

"I am going to look into this affair about Bond. It is a mystery, and it just suits me. I am going to learn all about the missing man. I may surprise somebody, yet!"

"You will if you do anything worth telling of," retorted John Brown. "Better stick to your bugs and weeds!"

"I have hunted both and like it, but I fancy it would be better to hunt men! I would then be like the wild free Indians who roam the plains with their reckless freedom and unerring scent for prey."

"Hear the boy!" scoffed John Brown.

Even the servants were privileged to revile Richard, but he always bore their sneers with calm unconcern. He did not resent the latest impoliteness.

John Brown had other work to do, and he went about it. Dreamer Dick left the house and wandered on through the town to the northern hills. He forgot his hunt for men and thought only of "weeds," as the colored man had very disrespectfully called the botanical specimens so dear to Dick's heart.

He was always on the watch for new specimens, and he found one on this occasion. Wandering among the rocks and peering into every recess he finally saw and pulled from a niche a something which was new to his botanical lore.

It was the coat of a man.

Dreamer Dick held it up and surveyed it with curiosity.

"A good, sound, almost new garment!" he murmured. "Since when did any one here get rich enough to throw away such a useful thing? By my faith! it would last me for a year, and I do believe I will take it away and get the good out of it. It is—Eh? Hullo!"

The coat was not so good as he thought it. In the left breast was a gash, clean and small, as if made with some sharp instrument. It was an injury, but did not necessarily ruin the garment. It could be mended. He turned it over, anxious to see what the other side showed. Then he beheld what would have been a shock to one less phlegmatic.

A big smear of blood was on the lining!

Dreamer Dick was not alarmed. He turned the coat over several times, looking to effect and wondering as to cause.

He would have been a very dull person had he not read a good deal from that ensanguined garment. That the clean gash was the result of a blow from a knife was certain, while the red stain indicated it had not been dealt in vain.

"Somebody has been stabbed!" murmured Dick. "He got murdered, I presume. If I shed as much blood as this I should never have lived to look for specimens, to-day. This is odd! Yes, and it's a mystery, and I do just dote on mysteries! I dare say this is more pleasant for me than for the man who got the blow. Wonder where he is?"

Richard looked around as if he expected the man to pop up and explain, but nothing of the kind occurred. He continued to examine the evidence already at hand, and another discovery followed.

"Why, this looks like Philemon Bond's coat!" he exclaimed. "It's the same cloth, and the

same cut. Can it be 'twas his? If so, where is he?"

Sagely Richard tapped his head with his fore-finger. He meditated deeply, and chuckled at the result.

"Mr. Bond is dead, and this is his coat!" he decided. "It is his only visible asset, as lawyers would say. Ha! Dick, my boy, here is a mystery you want a part in! Keep the coat, and you can have some fun with it. Hide it, boy, and then look for the killers!"

CHAPTER IV.

WOLF OR LAMB?

Two days later Leland Sherwin had just returned from his office and settled down in the house when he was informed that a caller wished to see him. As proof of the fact he had the person's card, and he read in a mood of some surprise:

"GABE GALL,

THE GAMBOLEER FROM GREAT HUMPH.

Looking up from the card he regarded John Brown in surprise.

"Is this a joke?" he asked.

"He may be; he looks bad enough for it, sir."

"I mean, is there really such a man there?"

"There's a man there, sir, but whether he's got such an uncommon name as he claims I don't know."

"What does he look like?"

"A checker-board! He's all rigged out in a plaid suit of two or three shades of gray, and if he ain't gallus of style I'm a liar, which I ain't an' never was. He's a sorter young chap, an' acts as if he owned the whole town. Kind of a cheeky feller, sir. I should say his name fits him. Gabe Gall! Who ever heard the like of it!"

Leland toyed with the card.

"I suppose I may as well see him," he decided, at last. "Show him up. Be ready to show him out if he is not wanted."

"I will, that!"

John Brown went his way with an air which indicated that the stranger had not made a friend of him, thus far.

Leland examined the card attentively.

"Gabe Gall!" he murmured. "It may be only the fancy of some of the many absurd persons who spring up here in the Wild West, but I can afford to make no enemies, just now. I know not in what guise some man may come with whom I want to be on good terms."

There was a brief lull; then the door reopened and the stranger entered. He came with quick steps and evidence of haste. He walked to within a few feet of Leland and stopped short.

"Mr. Sherwin?" he inquired, briskly.

"That's my name, sir."

"There's mine," and he thrust a card into Leland's hand. "You've got one like it, already, but there are some things one can't have too much of. This includes money and luck. Give me the biggest genius in the West, and I'll show you a dunce if he ain't got luck. See?"

The visitor had taken Leland's hand, though the latter instinctively made an effort to avoid such a warm greeting; and was shaking the member as cordially as if he had met an old friend.

"Now," he added, "this is a blooming town, but I'll defy you to tell how it would be anything but bankrupt if it had not struck a streak of good luck and wallowed in it up to the upper vest-button. How does that impress you?"

For some reason—perhaps to strengthen the impression—Mr. Gall kept on shaking the imprisoned hand. Leland tried to get away, but as he did not resort to violence, he was not successful.

"You and I," pursued the visitor, choking off the host's effort to get in a word, "would have died in our babyhood if we had not been in luck. Some persons might say our neighbors would have been in big luck if we had died then, but we are not of that opinion, I reckon."

At last the caller gave Leland a chance to speak. He had not been favorably impressed by the man, and his voice was ungracious as he inquired:

"Have you business with me, sir?"

"I have. I never saw the time when I hadn't business with some one. It runs in my blood, as I may say. Go to Great Hump, my home, and they will tell you I am a hustler of the thirty-third degree. I'm away up in the order, you see."

"But your business—"

"Yes, yes; I am a business man, and one who never throws anything over his shoulder. Sit down and let's take life easy."

There was no such thing as hurrying this loquacious fellow, and Leland succumbed to the inevitable. He motioned to a seat, and the gentleman from Great Hump sat down with smiling composure.

He looked to be about thirty years old. He was rather small of stature, but plump and round of form. John Brown had not exaggerated when he said the man looked like a checker-board. His gray suit would have been modest if it had lacked so many shades, but as it was, it appeared flashy and vulgar to the observer of good taste. To add to the effect, a fiery-red

tie graced his neck, and he was simply gorgeous.

His hair was of dark red, and his face seemed to have caught the hue, for it was as rosy as that of a young girl. It was a smiling, good-natured face, but full of audacity. That he had an abundance of assurance, of "cheek," was to be seen at the first glance.

"I am ready to hear you," remarked Leland.

"Have you any wine in the house?" inquired Mr. Gall, smilingly.

"Have I? Yes, but what of it?"

"I'll open a bottle with you. My throat is full of cobwebs, and a little of the nectar will clean the obstruction away. I want to be in condition to talk, for I am a sociable fellow. I've come to stay with you for awhile, Sherwin!"

"To stay with me?"

"Yes; to make you a visit!"

The speaker smiled in his usual happy-go-lucky way, but Leland did not reciprocate. He felt like showing the man the door, but it was not a time when he could afford to be too rash in his ways. Gabe Gall appeared to be a mere cheeky adventurer, but it would be safe to make sure on the point before going too far.

"I don't know you," the banker remonstrated.

"You will, later on. Just order up the wine, and then we will settle down to business."

Leland felt like one under a spell. He was growing afraid of this person—he knew not why. Acting under this spell he rung for John Brown, and sent him for wine.

"During the intermission, read this," Gabe directed, and brought out the folded paper from his pocket. "It will show you I am one of the white hen's chickens. Letter of introduction, you see."

Leland took the missive. One glance showed him it was not, as he had feared, a communication from the Consolidated Banking Company, and he began to breathe more freely. He read as follows:

"TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:—This will introduce Mr. Gabe Gall, of the town of Great Hump. He is one worthy of respect, trust and confidence. Whoever can do him a favor will confer obligations upon the undersigned, who knows him well.

"PETTIBONE MCGREE."

"You see it's all right," remarked Gabe, smiling.

"Hardly, for I never heard of Mr. Pettibone McGree."

"Oh! he lives at Great Hump, you see."

"I never heard of him."

"He's all right; I can recommend him!"

"You recommend each other, it seems."

"Yes. Oh! Pettibone is all correct."

"I never heard of Great Hump, either."

"No? Well, Pettibone and I live there. It's straight, you see."

Mr. Gall was as easy as if he had produced unimpeachable evidence. Just then John Brown came in. Gabe skipped nimbly out of his chair, seized the bottle and corkscrew, and drew the cork with skill and dispatch. Pouring out two glasses, he extended one to his host.

"Drink hearty, and give the house a good name!" he directed. "By Jove! that's a good article! I'll have another glass. Shall I fill yours, Lele?"

John Brown was gazing in mute wonder. What manner of a man was this who seemed to have taken full possession of the Sherwin residence, and all in it?

Leland again submitted, and then sent the servant away. He wanted to be done with his caller, and get rid of him, if such a thing was possible. He was a nightmare to the banker.

"You keep a very fair article of wine," remarked Gabe, "but not the best. I will give you the result of my experience, which is very considerable, and we'll send for some of the A1 sort. Of course I'll let you pay for it; don't let us quarrel on that score. We can get it here in a week, I reckon."

"Suppose I don't want any wine?"

"Then I'll drink it all. Depend upon it, it shall not be wasted."

"You speak as if you intend to stay in my house, sir."

"I do! I was told I should find it a good place to be in, and I find I was not misinformed. Yes, I'll stay with you for an indefinite period, and I dare say we shall get on together famously."

"You have not mentioned the business which has brought you to Shadow Shaft."

"No! Did I forget that? Oh! you see I am in the banking trade, myself. I've always been on the outside, and my ventures in the past have been merely to watch other men get rich. Now, I am going to study your system and get a wiggle on in dead earnest. See?"

"No; I don't see. Ours is a private institution. Do you think we would admit a stranger to our secrets?"

"Of course not; I don't ask that; but I can learn more by hanging around the edges than most men could by going right into your office. Why, in a few weeks I'll know enough to be inspector of your affairs!"

Leland moved uneasily.

"What do you know about inspectors?"

"Pettibone McGree told me that your banking concern had them."

"Are you one?" Leland demanded, bluntly.

"Am I? Bless you, no; I wish I was. If I had the posish I'd not be rolling around in a state of dead-brokenness. I am looking for a snap, but I haven't found it, yet."

The man from Great Hump continued as cool, easy and good-natured as ever, but Leland was not inclined to take him as innocent until there was proof to that effect. He might be only a mere adventurer and person of cheek, but with missing Philemon Bond haunting him and the hourly fear that some one would come to inquire for the lost inspector Leland saw danger in all things. He wished he had courage to order his companion out of the house, as he would have done at any time before Bond came and went, but—the courage was not his.

"If you'll show me to a room I'll wash so I can meet the family in good trim," added Gabe, presently. "I want to make a good impression. You know how it is, yourself!"

He smiled into Leland's face in his old confident, good-humored way, and rose to go to the room as indicated.

The banker had to make his first decision, then. He decided to temporize.

"I'll acquiesce for now," he thought, "and then watch the fellow sharply. I can soon tell whether he is to be feared. If I find him only a bummer, I'll send him adrift with haste."

It was a reasonable decision on the surface, but Leland might find it was easier to keep a person out at the start, than to get rid of him when he was once in.

Once more John Brown was summoned, and Gabe went away with him, talking volubly as they receded, and treating the black man exactly as he had treated the black man's master. Leland watched him with an anxious expression on his face.

"Who and what is he? Can it be any man would have the audacity to come in here as he seems to have come? Cheek ends at a certain point, but if he is only a mere wanderer who wants to make a raise, he passes the limit. Is he a spy for the company? But why should any agent, secret or otherwise, act such a part? Probably he is only a bummer but—I dare not risk too much at this stage of affairs!"

Picking up the card he studied it attentively. "Gabe Gall!" he murmured. "Is that a name of fiction and derision? It may be real, for there is, I think, a German name thus spelled, though the Germans pronounce it Gabil, if I am not in error. Does this fellow mean G-a-h-l-l or G-a-w-l-l? His show of cheek indicates it is our good Americanism of Gall, itself, reduced to proprietorship. Gall! Well, he has the quality, anyhow."

Flinging the card aside impatiently, Leland took a turn about the room. He tried to get his courage up.

"Why do I fear this person?" he finally asked. "He is not, he cannot be a detective! No man would play such an absurd part—and yet, the greater the disguise, the more the chance of success. I'll let him stay for awhile, and see what he will do. I imagine he will soon betray himself, if he has any secret to hide."

Outside, the stream of life at Shadow Shaft rolled on. Miners, carpenters, merchants, servants—all paused as they went past to look instinctively at the residence of the man who stood foremost in the town and in their regard. Was not Leland fortunate?

CHAPTER V.

MONARCH OF ALL IN SIGHT.

GABE GALL came down in due time. He had not visibly changed his appearance, but he declared he felt much better. He was smoking a cigar, though no one had been asked if it was agreeable to those who owned the house.

"Fine lay-out, you've got here," he remarked. "I know I shall like, I take naturally to luxury."

"We like what we are used to," observed Leland, with covert sarcasm.

"I don't," frankly confessed Gabe. "Some may be stuck on husks and bran, but I ain't. The good things of life are good enough for me. Your place just about fills the bill. I suppose I have seen more of the rough side of life than a city cat or an orphan goat."

"You seem to have taken it easily."

"My dear sir, there's nothing like it. If you can't be lucky, be happy; that's my motto. By the way, is Philemon Bond here?"

Suddenly, in reality, the question was put, but the speaker remained as calm as ever as he threw this bomb into Leland's camp. He lay back in his chair and watched lazily for the reply.

That Leland was not overwhelmed was surprising. How he managed to remain so quiet, outwardly, he never could tell, afterward. He thought the dreaded shock had come, yet he was cool in the face of the danger.

"Whom did you inquire for?" he asked, steadily.

"Old Phil Bond; friend of mine."

"Mr. Bond is not here. Why did you expect he was?"

"I found some papers belonging to him in the top drawer of the dressing-case."

Leland did not pause to ask why Gabe had

been looking in the drawer, but, silently berating John Brown for giving the new guest the same room Bond had occupied, he answered:

"He was here a few days ago, but has gone away."

"Where did he go to?"

"I don't know."

"Fine fellow, the old man is; a little given to biting heads off when he is in ill humor, but mainly a clever chap. I suppose all is well with him?"

"He did not say otherwise."

"I suppose he found business all right, here?"

Gabe tipped his nose up toward the ceiling and blew a wreath of smoke at vacancy in a careless way.

Leland had listened with the conviction that the worst was coming. The man from Great Hump had taken a long time to get around to business, but it seemed he had got there, at last.

"Are you connected with the Consolidated?" Leland bluntly asked.

"I? Bless me! no; why did you think that?"

"If not, what do you care for the business?"

"Oh! you have the reputation of doing a trade here which makes your enemies stand on their heads. I hear of your house wherever I go. Sherwin & Fearing stand high. Jove! I wish I had a finger in the pie! Say, Lele, you can't divvy with me, can you?"

"What do you want?" inquired Sherwin, in a low voice.

"Dust, bullion, tin, cash—anything that has the true ring. I'm not proud; a solid check would do me."

What did he mean? Sherwin suspected he was making overtures looking to some dishonest division of spoils, but was not foolish enough to fall into any trap.

"Why not consult your friend Bond?"

"He and I are not close acquaintances. I would gladly take financial lessons from him, but what can one expect from a fellow who is in good luck? Such a gent is not the one to help a lame dog over the fence. How is it with you?"

"You are too vague. What do you want?"

"A business chance. Now, I'm here in your glorious town, and if you see any snap rolling around loose, just gobble it for me, will you? Pity the woes of a poor old man!"

If Gabe Gall was really in need of any help, and feeling as bad as he claimed, he did not show the fact in his manner. He remained as glib and happy of manner as ever. Leland did not know how to take him, and as he wound up Gabe complicated the matter by producing another cigar and genially saying:

"Smoke one with me, will you? You'll find them equal to any you ever saw. Imported high-rollers."

Gabe tipped back and looked happy.

"Now, I want you to introduce me as a rich blood from Great Hump," he added. "There's nothing like making an impression. I may yet get an heiress on the string. If you know of any, put me on the raffle. I shall be with you for some weeks, perhaps, and we can work the thing up to the queen's taste. Refined modesty will go a long ways."

Sherwin wished he dared to throw this man out. His cheek was amazing, and worthy of a severe check. Unfortunately, the banker dared not give it. He had to sit there and hear Gabe putting forth all these ideas and plans with his easy, smiling manner and endure it the best he could. The man fascinated him, too. His assurance was sublime, if not commendable. He had a way of looking into Leland's face as if he was perfectly sure of sympathy which was like that of an old friend. It actually made the banker wonder if he was awake or asleep.

Once or twice he had thought with dread that it was near the supper hour, and wondered what would follow, but this was nearly lost sight of in the pressure of more important matters until the door suddenly opened and Ruth Sherwin appeared. Seeing Gabe she would have retreated, but he skipped nimbly out of his chair.

"Pardon me!" he exclaimed, with a deep bow and shining smile; "but don't let us drive you away. You are perfectly welcome. Very welcome, isn't she, Lele?"

Leland found no words of reply, and Ruth stood and gazed at Gabe in wonder. Who could this man be who was taking it upon himself to act the host to her brother's exclusion?

She soon had an answer, such as it was.

"Miss," the stranger went on, "allow me to make myself known. Here is my card—Gabe Gall, Great Hump. Inventor and patentee, by trade. Sometimes called the Gambolier of Great Hump, because I am not of a lachrymose nature; the planet I was born under utterly forbade it, and I can't buck against fate. You are Lele's sister, I suppose. Glad to see you, I assure you. Won't you sit down with us?"

Leland was dumfounded. If the visitor was going to carry his audacity so far as to annoy others, it would be necessary to put a stop to it, and to his stay in the house, let him be what he might. There was a limit to endurance.

Now, the eccentric conduct of the man did not impress Ruth as it did her brother. She had no secret, and knew of no cause for fear. This fact, combined with the natural inference that

he was a welcome guest of her brother's, led her to think only that he was very peculiar. It was usual for one to wait for an introduction, but there might be a reason for not waiting, now.

The radical good humor which showed in his eyes could not but impress her favorably, since she saw in him only an ordinary caller.

She smiled and bowed.

"Thank you; but I was only calling for my brother to go with me to the supper table. I think I will not sit down."

"One does like a supper seat better than any other. Lele—ahem! ahem!"

Sherwin understood he was called upon to give an introduction, and as Ruth did not seem angry, he was not disposed to force matters to a crisis, then.

"Ruth, this is Mr. Gall, who is temporarily in town—"

"Gabe Gall, of Great Hump; inventor, patentee, banker, mining expert, *et cetera*; especially the *et cet*. When you are in Great Hump, look for my name on the business signs." Then to Leland, the Gambolier added in a skillful aside: "She can look, but it will be like searching the heavens for a new star—it will be a surprise all around, if found!" Then aloud, he went on: "I claim to be a hustler, but I am not indifferent to the gentler side of life and the finer feelings of the human heart."

"You unite a good many commendable qualities, Mr. Gall," replied Ruth, with a smile.

"Perhaps so, though modesty forbids me to mention it, myself."

Gabe in the roll of one given to modesty was a new revelation, but Ruth met his assertion without dispute, and they exchanged several smiling speeches.

Leland listened gravely. He was glad matters had not come to an unpleasant crisis, though he could not see how Ruth could be so blind; he did not remember he had himself paved the way for her to think well of Gabe by allowing him to seem an honored guest. And as the Gambolier did not go to an extreme, she was amused by his manner and rather impressed by his sunny temper.

They went to supper. Gabe was jovial through it all, and he made no bad breaks, though his flow of conversation remained unbroken.

After the meal was over he spent his time with the family. Ruth honored them with her presence for some time, and she and Gabe did most of the talking. The latter did not add to his bad reputation. He continued to show assurance, but not in so marked a degree as when with Leland, at first. Perhaps Ruth was a check upon him, for she certainly was charming enough to impress any one favorably. She had not so much of robust physique, comparatively, as marked her brother.

She was of medium height and somewhat slender. She had a delicate style of beauty which was very attractive, and her manners may be said to have been of the same sort. There were those who regarded her as lacking in proper firmness, but it frequently happens that people are not correct in their judgments.

At an early hour Gabe signified that he would like to retire, and was given in charge of John Brown. Once in the room the Gambolier opened on him in the usual voluble style, and the black man was kept busy about trifles while Gabe talked. Suddenly the latter turned from some trivial employment and demanded:

"What is your theory as to this mysterious disappearance of Philemon Bond?"

"Fore the Lord, sir, I don't know," was the reply.

"No theory, at all?"

"Not a one."

"D'y'e think he met with foul play?"

"I don't see how anybody could get in here ter do him harm, sir."

"Suppose the harmer was in, already?"

"Bless me! then it must be some one who belonged in the house!"

"Didn't that ever occur to you, before?"

"Well, I's considered the circumstances an' the circumlocutions a good bit, but I can't jest see the p'int. Nobody here would want ter do him harm, or have any reason fer it, an' ef we did, we ain't a community o' assassins, sir; not by a jug-full, sir!"

"Old Phil was too large to evaporate, eh?"

"Bless me yes!"

"Then he had help to get out of sight; that's dead sure. Question is, who gave him the boost, and why was it done?"

"Why, if we knew that, the whole story would be knowed."

"That is the point, exactly. Now, I've only just struck the town, and don't know how it impresses outsiders. I am curious to hear what an intelligent man like you thinks of it."

John Brown felt himself honored, and he assumed a wise expression.

"Wal, sir, my opinion is jest this: It's a mighty mysterious affair, sir!"

"Granted! How much did you see of it?"

A pantomimic invitation had led the black man to act the valet for Mr. Gall. He was now pretty well groomed off, and Gabe slipped a dollar into his companion's hand. The coin went further; it went to his heart. John Brown's eyes beamed, and he was not reluctant to talk.

He went over the story of Philemon Bond's disappearance in detail. He had a good listener. The Gambolier did not once interrupt, but he certainly lost no part of the narrative. Toward the end he made a few suggestive comments. They were not questions, but they answered the same purpose, and were very successful.

When the account was all over there certainly was nothing more to tell which John Brown could unfold.

Gabe yawned carelessly.

"Well, old Phil don't interest me. He'll turn up all right, I reckon. I'll go to bed now. Good-night, my friend, and may pleasant dreams be yours. I'll see you in the morning. So-long!"

John Brown went out so well pleased that he did not realize he had acted the human sieve. Left alone, Gabe lighted a cigar and sat down with the air of one who means to enjoy himself. He smoked placidly for some time, and then rose and went to the bureau. Pulling out one of the drawers, he looked inside. Then he smiled quietly.

"He might have spared himself the trouble. I certainly did not tell of the papers Bond left until I had seen all I wanted. No; and I fancy the whole lot has not fallen into the hands of whoever has taken them away so suddenly."

From his pocket the speaker took out a folded sheet of paper and spread it out before him. There was writing upon it, and he read what was there recorded. The first entry was in these words:

"Evidence of crooked work somewhere. Loss of cash. Chief deficit seems to be in Sherwin & Fearling's department. They have always impressed me as being very honest men. It can hardly be they have done any wrong. Investigation will doubtless clear them. I go there at once. Shall house myself in Sherwin's home, as usual. Think he can explain away all that bothers me now. He can't be crooked."

"P. BOND, Inspector."

If Leland had seen this paper he might well have wondered if there was not danger for him in the future.

Gabe Gall studied the entry carefully.

"I am a man who never meddles with what don't concern me," he finally observed. "But if I were built on a different plan I might find a way to use this. How Philemon was mistaken when he said there was a screw loose in this town! Nobody here would do a mean or dishonest thing. I wonder if they are charitable? Would they house a poor fellow like me—if he knew their secrets? I fancy I am monarch of all in sight!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SUSPECTS OF THE ROCKS.

YOUNG as Shadow Shaft was, it had its low quarter like the most conventional of cities. This quarter was at the extreme western side of the town. There the ground rose steeply and raggedly. It made fantastic corners and recesses, and no one would go there for an easy walk.

Up in this neighborhood was the most notorious hut of the town.

Reference has before been made to the fact that Dorcas Huse, housekeeper for the Sherwins, was the mother of four sons; Dreamer Dick and three who lived by themselves. They never went to Sherwin's, and it was tacitly understood that if Dorcas was to keep her situation, her sons other than Dick must stay away from her place of employment.

Early in the history of the camp the Huse brood had appeared on the scene. Arad, Lute and Ab went to work in the mines. In a short time they changed to another set of employers, and this change was followed by another. In a short time they had labored for every firm doing business at Shadow Shaft, and left the last of these.

This made some comment, and shortly after every one in the place knew they had been successively discharged by all. They had proved too quarrelsome, and otherwise disagreeable, for any one to endure their presence.

Next, they went to work on their own responsibility. This just suited them. They dug gold when they positively had to work, and not at any other time.

Lazy, slovenly, ungracious and vicious, they easily ranked as the worst men in camp, but as they had not been detected in any actual work of violence or dishonesty, and their mother filled a useful place in the Sherwin household, they had never been disturbed. They were left to themselves; a condition of affairs against which they never rebelled.

Of course they were not the only undesirable citizens. Others shared the doubtful honor with them, and Shadow Shaft had its region of ill-repute and suspicion like larger towns. Among these men and women of unsavory character the Huse family was popular and kingly.

When they had gone the rounds of the regular mines they had been named "the Cast-off Crew" by some one, and the name stuck. As such every one in camp knew them.

On the evening when Gabe Gall was enjoying Sherwin's hospitality for the first time the Huse shanty was lighted and occupied. Lute and Ab

of the brothers were present, and so was Amazon Moll, Lute's wife.

This woman was a character in herself, and no more vicious person drew breath within the limits of the camp. Masculine of figure, she had an ungoverned temper and a spite against every one not of her own gang. Even they were often called upon to remember she had a tongue to upbraid and a hand to strike, but her unwomanly ways rendered her popular among her kin when she did not see fit to use these weapons of offense and defense.

All three were smoking, for Moll was not too proud to enjoy the good things of life, whether they were supposed to be for her sex or not; and silence reigned in the room. Each person bent his, or her, gaze upon the floor, and seemed to find ample food for thought.

They were interrupted when the door opened and Arad Huse came in.

The three brothers now present looked very much alike. All were swarthy of complexion, muscular of form and generally unprepossessing. Their broad faces were heavy and coarse, and their prevailing expression was one of sullen and sulky nature. It was not unusual to see one of them go for days without speaking to any one, though they were generally talkative enough; and their whole life was one of discontent.

Arad had been born the eldest son, and, assuming the position of leader at the start, never had been called upon to yield it. In a certain way these three brothers admired each other, and as Arad was so much like the rest, they had been willing, thus far, to stand by him in all he did.

Now, he hung his rifle up on a peg and sat down in silence. Ab, Lute and Lute's wife watched him curiously. He lighted his pipe and began to smoke.

"Wal," finally broke forth Amazon Moll, in the blunt fashion of the tribe, "ain't you got any tongue?"

Arad blew out three clouds of smoke before he answered:

"I've got a tongue, but I ain't got no news."

"No sign from them?"

"No."

"That's bad!"

"We didn't expect it," reminded Lute.

"Wal, does that keep it from bein' bad?" retorted Moll, sharply.

"I reckon we kin git there just the same," quoth Ab.

"Ef we don't we may as wal move out o' Shadow Shaft."

"I'll make my mark before I go!" declared Ab.

They talked in their fruitless way, but Arad said nothing. He smoked and said nothing. Finally he looked up and broke his thoughtful silence.

"Bring me that paper!" he directed.

No questions were asked, but Amazon Moll went to one side and from a scarcely noticeable niche in the wall drew out the object requested. It was, in point of fact, a letter, though it never had been through the mail. Receiving it, Arad spread it out on the table and proceeded to read. He had gone over it enough times before so he ought to have known every word by heart, but he did not, and his capacity for reading any thing, be it ever so clear, was as limited as his education.

Laboriously he perused what followed:

"MY DEAR LELAND:—I have by merest chance heard of your effort to raise money here, and the ill results of your attempt, owing to the present stringency of the money market. I know not why you need it, for I had supposed you were so well supplied that you need never borrow, but this much is certain:

"You shall have the money!"

"I am not in trade, and the ups and downs of the money world do not affect me. I have ten thousand dollars—my all. It is at your disposal, and you shall have it all."

"I am delighted to prove to you that I am not a thing of wax, or selfish in the regard I have claimed for you. By this messenger—a most trusted man—I send the ten thousand dollars. I will not wait for the usual channels of conveyance. It shall be yours as soon as a swift messenger can take it to you."

"I have been thinking of coming to Shadow Shaft, and this I shall now venture to do without further formality. In about a week you may expect to see me there. I know not whether I shall be welcome, but I will risk it."

"I shall, of course, stop at a hotel—unless I receive directions from you to do otherwise. I will notify you of my arrival, and if you wish to call on me I shall be pleased to receive you."

"As usual, I shall come on horseback, and ride over the hills in the cool of the night. Probably I shall arrive about twelve o'clock."

ZYLPHA MAYNE."

Arad managed to wade through this after awhile.

"Durned queer epistle!" he commented. "She begins by callin' him her 'dear Leland,' an' then gets timorsome an' don't seem sure o' the ground under her feet."

"Women are timid!" added Amazon Moll, grimly.

Lute and Ab laughed loudly at what was plainly a decided witticism in their estimation, but Arad did not join in the tribute to her wit.

Remaining sullen-faced, he took another paper from his pocket.

"Hark ter this!" he directed, and then read aloud as follows:

"LELAND:—I have not heard from you in regard to the letter I sent you some days ago, nor do I know if you received it in safety; but I am going to visit Shadow Shaft as I told you I would, then. I hope all is well with you, for your welfare is of great importance to me. I shall reach your town, via the saddle line, Tuesday evening."

ZYLPHA."

Amazon Moll broke forth explosively:

"Why, the durned woman is due ter-night!"

"Ter-night it is," Arad agreed.

"What be yer goin' ter do about it?"

"Thar's only one thing ter do," the elder Huse answered, slowly. "She mustn't get here, an' thar ain't but one way ter prevent it."

"Do her up as you did her messenger!" flashed Moll, exultantly.

"Wal, no; I don't see no use o' that; besides, et would be a bit hard on a woman."

"Durn you fer a soft-head, Arad Huse!" Moll exclaimed; "you ain't weakenin' be you?"

"I never weaken," retorted Arad, resentfully, "but thar ain't no harm in a woman—"

"Oh! ain't thar? Mebbe you think I couldn't do no harm?"

"What you be don't count in what she is. You are a chip off a block o' one sort, an' she's another. Don't consider her by your standard. Thar ain't many sech trumps es you, Moll!"

"Ef you imagine thar ain't no harm in an ordinary woman you will git bad left in some deal, Arad Huse. I work on the square; I'm manly in my way, an' don't never play the sneak. Other women do, an' with greenhorns they can do a pile o' mischief. You hear me? Beware o' women, I say, fer they are the devil's own chickens. Trust them, an' you come ter grief!"

"Arad ain't said he will trust nobody," remonstrated Lute.

"You hush up!" snapped the affectionate wife. "I kin see, ef you can't, that he's got something on his mind."

"I'm goin' ter bring her here!" confessed Arad, half-defiantly.

"You're a dratted fool!"

Fiercely Moll made the assertion, but none of the men joined in the revolt. The Amazon did not want to share her throne with any one, but, though the plan was then first presented to Lute and Ab, it occurred to them it would be pleasant to have the other woman there. It suddenly entered Moll's mind that Arad was actuated by such motives, and her scorn broke loose afresh.

"So you're in love!" she scoffed.

"I ain't never seen her," Arad answered.

"What of it? That don't go. You men would take up with a doll! All o' you are jest as bad as dudes; you don't care ef a woman ain't got no muscle, an' ef her waist is as small as a wasp's. Durn you! ye haven't any sense!"

Arad did not seem moved by the accusation.

"You're a fool, Moll," he remarked, with the frankness of the Cast-off Crew. "Can't you see that we must not let her reach the town? Ef she did, an' told her story, we would be likely soon ter be known ter all fer the way we used her messenger."

"Can't you kill her as you did him?"

"I ain't a woman-killer."

"Oh! you're mighty soft, all at once! I'll do the job!"

"No, you won't; she ain't ter be killed. Thar isn't no use of it, an' why should we do it? It shall not be done. She ain't ter be harmed."

"An' you'll bring her here?"

"Yes."

"Wal, I'll see she is given a warm welcome!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE AMBUSH.

AMAZON MOLL was on the war-path. This was nothing new for her. She had her voice in the councils of the Cast-off Crew, and was always given as much attention and respect as anybody. This was not saying much, but in the present case it was clear she must be placated.

"Don't make a fool of yourself," Arad urged. "The gal won't be with us long, fer it ain't ter our interests ter hev her here, but come she must fer awhile. Et's the only way fer the thing ter blow over."

"Bah! you ain't got an atom o' nerve!" Moll retorted.

Arad's eyes glittered.

"You see me do up the man!" he answered.

"You know how it was. Ab an' Lute was away, so you agreed ter go with me an' help in silencin' the feller. We went ter the pass an' met him. Jest at the crisis you sprained yer ankle an' wa'n't in it at all."

"Then the feller come down the trail. Did I weaken? No; I don't reckon I did. What did I keer ef he was one man or a dozen? I laid fer him by the wayside. I didn't know how he was heeled, but I didn't want no gun-shootin' there, so I put my own shooters away. I laid fer him bare-handed."

Arad warmed to his recital. He rose, and, with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks, acted

the old affair in pantomime again. A vivid story he made of it, too.

"I kept still until he got right opposite me, an' then I jumped out an' at him. I went like this!—I grabbed him by the throat like that!—I pulled him off his hoss to the trail.

"He was a big feller, full o' muscle an' grit, an' he got right down ter business. It wa'n't his way ter let no man git the bulge on him without a fight, an' I must say he did fight pretty. We had it hot an' fast. We rolled over on the ground like panthers in a death-grapple, both strugglin' fer the upper hand.

"Wal, Arad Huse ain't the man that gineraly gits left, an' he didn't then. I finally got him foul, an' after the heat o' the thing was over, it was easy. I swung him around, an' then I used my knife.

"That was the last o' him.

"I went through him, lookin' fer the ten thousand dollars. Did I find it? Wal, I'll be durned ef I did! Not a red; not a blamed cent of it. He had a few coins like what any one would hev ef he was on the trail. That was all. It was tough!"

Arad paused to air the old grievance, but Amazon Moll laughed unsympathizingly. It was a by-gone, and she had grown accustomed to the failure.

"Then you made the air blue?"

"Why shouldn't I?" growled Arad. "I'd resked my neck an' got nary gain fer it. Yes; there was some gain: a little cash, an these things."

He held up his legs, which were incased in handsome boots.

"I'd hev took his whole wardrobe," he added, "but I dassen't. Et seemed tolerably safe ter gobble the boots, an' I got right on ter them. Wal, when it was all over I dragged him to the side o' the trail an' chucked him over ter the swift waters of Millstone Creek. That was the last o' him.

"The deed was well done," Moll admitted. "Oh! you can work when you set out; I don't deny that. You ought ter work now, though, an' fix that female, not let her come here. I don't want no woman around ter bother me. See?"

"You sha'n't hev her long, Moll. I'll fix it all right, so you won't be bothered a great while. But don't embarrass my plans now, fer I ain't got the time ter arrange any other way."

Arad spoke persuasively, and he had his way, as he usually did when he set out to do a thing. The Amazon was reluctant, but she gave way to the leading spirit.

"Bring her along, then. I s'pose I kin stand it fer a while. Bring her, an' it sha'n't be said I didn't do my part."

"Now you talk like the trump you be," Arad approvingly declared. "We can't afford ter hev her tell of a missin' man until we git ready to hoe our row in due shape; but that won't be long. Now, who goes with me?"

Lute looked eager, but was too prudent to let Moll see how much he was interested in the unknown woman. Ab was not under the fear of a wife, so he put in his claim at once, and with zeal. Arad looked at the melancholy clock which stood on the shelf, and added:

"We'll go now. Keep things all right here, Moll. We may be late in comin' back; not because we shall delay when we get a chance to move, but ef the gal takes the Rooster Run trail alone, she may find it different travelin' from what she has been used ter—an' then, ag'in, she may hev more nerve than we think."

"She'll be a blamed fool!" declared Moll, who had no good opinion of any member of her sex.

Arad did not answer. He and Ab made ready for the trip. They were men who usually carried rifles at all times, but on this occasion there did not seem any reason for such a display. If they could not capture a woman without such things, they had better not have her at all.

Of course they had their revolvers and knives. They left the house and started for the scene of action.

West of Shadow Shaft the land was precipitous and wild. The Huse home was on the boundary between where one could go with some ease, and where only a determined climber could progress. Further on lay the trail which led to Rooster Run, and toward that point the brothers went, by means of a cross-cut.

"Is this woman good-lookin'?" asked Ab, presently.

"How do I know?" Arad growled. "I ain't never seen her."

"She's young."

"She'll grow out o' that; all folks do."

"Et would be sorter pleasant ter hev a young person at the house. Moll is a reg'lar dragon, an' all the other young women in Shadow Shaft snub us 'cause we're who we be."

"Durn it! do you keer?" demanded Arad, angrily.

"Wal, I think it would be sorter good ter hev the gal at the den."

The elder brother stopped short.

"Now you hush up!" he ordered. "You don't want ter git yer mind on this female. She belongs ter the upper ten, an' the man who does get ter thinkin' about sech ain't o' the least

earthly use. See? Come off! Don't be a howlin' idiot!"

"That'll do fer you!" snapped Ab. "I don't let no man boss me! You needn't be afraid o' my fallin' in love with nobody; but what ef I did? Ain't I got the right? Wal, I reckon I hev, an' I shouldn't ask nobody fer leave ter do it, either. Ketch on?"

"I ketch on ter the fact you're a blamed fool. Now, let the gal alone or you'll get us all inter trouble."

"Want her yerself, mebbe?"

"Oh! you be hanged!"

"Not until you've been!"

This very fraternal conversation meant nothing, as far as warmth of language was concerned. It was the usual way for the Huse brethren to make their ideas known. Quarrels were numerous with them, yet they did not seem to mean as bad as they said. They never came to blows, and, if their wordy warfare was taken as worth nothing, as it should be, perhaps, they lived in as much of brotherly harmony, such as it was, as many who had better reputations.

Reaching the Rooster Run trail, they went on until they gained the place which Arad had before selected as the best for the work in hand.

There, the pass through which the road ran for the greater part of the way was at its best, and most impressive. On each side the cliff made a wall of imposing size. So precipitous was it that few would have cared to attempt the scaling of it, and there it hung, a grim sentinel of double form, keeping its vigil through the ages.

The members of the Cast-off Crew were not thinking of such things as they settled down to await the coming of their prey. All they cared for was that no one should interrupt their work.

Arad lay down and placed his ear close to the ground. He could distinguish no unusual sound; no hoof-beats which should mark the approach of their victim.

Ab meditated. He had not been so indifferent as he claimed, and he was looking forward to the coming of the girl to the shanty with far more interest than he had confessed. It would mark a new epoch in the life he had led, he thought.

He was right, and yet he little knew just how much it meant to him and the Huse family in general.

"What'll you do with the hoss?" he inquired, anon.

"Kill it!" Arad answered, briefly.

"Et's a pity to kill a good hoss; it means jest so much money."

"An' jest so much danger, in this case. Nobody would like it more than me, but we can't hev it. 'Twould be suicide ter leave it around where it could be found. The hoss must die."

"Great pity, by thunder!"

Ab heaved a deep sigh, but found consolation in thinking of a prize they did not intend to kill. If they got Zylpha Mayne, he could afford to be content.

"She must be mine," he thought. "Lute has a wife, an' Arad claims he don't keer fer sech. Wal, I do, an' I'm goin' ter hev her. Ef we steal her we may as well go one step furdur an' hev some good out of it all. The gal shall be mine ef she is anything fer looks!"

Surely, the girl who was coming over the hills had cause to fear the hour when she struck the town of Shadow Shaft.

The evil pair relapsed into new silence. Ab was thinking of his conquest; Arad was listening for sounds which would tell of the coming of their prey. If the law-abiding citizens of the town had known what was going on, the reputation of the Cast-off Crew would have gone lower than ever, but vice likes to strike by night, and it appeared that only Omnipotent eyes were cognizant of the scene in the pass.

"Hark!"

Arad suddenly uttered the word, though no sound was being made, there.

"Is she comin'?" Ab demanded, eagerly.

The elder brother did not answer. There was a moment's silence; then he leaped to his feet.

"Back inter the shadders!" he ordered. "Be as mute as a graveyard. We want this thing on the quiet, an' any mischance may ruin all. Ef the hoss is full of any life he may bolt when he gets the tip. We must hev him by the bit afore he knows what is up."

The speaker was forcing Ab back, much to that person's disgust, for the younger brother was not a child in that sort of wisdom peculiar to the gang. They were in the shadows, and there they waited.

Ab, too, heard the foot-beats of the horse, then. Some one was coming, surely.

"Don't hurt her, Arad," he cautioned. "She's only a gal, you know."

"Oh! you be durn! Be sensible, will ye? I know my biz."

"So do I, but you keep harpin' at me, an' I can't say a word."

"You're all right, Ab, ef you don't get this gal on the brain. We needn't quarrel. I know your worth an' bravery. Say no more."

Silence was necessary, for into view came a rider. Both men looked keenly. As they had hoped, it was a woman.

CHAPTER VIII.

AWAITING THE WORD.

As the men never had seen Zylpha Mayne there was no definite way of deciding whether this was she, but women on the Rooster Run trail were so uncommon that they had no doubt in the case. They prepared for action.

Nearer came the rider. The horse stepped with the proud air of a mettlesome steed, and the equestrienne sat the saddle with grace and ease.

"Pretty as a picture!" muttered Ab, referring to the riding, rather than the girl's face, of which he could see nothing.

She neared the place of ambush. Arad crouched for the spring, panther-like. Then, when she was only a few feet away, he leaped out with Ab at his side. According to arrangement the latter grasped the horse by the rein, while Arad made for the rider.

"It's all right, gal," he assured, hastily. "We ain't goin' ter do you harm, an' you needn't hev a bit o' fear. Jest keep quiet an' we will use you like we would our own mother or sister. Don't be skeered!"

The horse had resented the interruption, but as his mistress had not given him any orders in the case he did not test Ab's strength greatly.

"What does this mean?" the girl demanded, in a clear voice.

"Miss," Arad explained, "we only want to help you on your way. Et ain't safe here fer a gal, an' we kin take you through in a way you will find altogether different. We want ter save you from trouble."

"What trouble?"

"Why, you may meet some enemy."

Quickly came the retort:

"So I think, and I will leave them, now!"

Down on the horse came the whip, and the animal leaped forward with force which almost took Ab Huse off his feet. He managed to keep up, and was in a fair way of subduing the horse, but the rider suddenly pulled out a revolver and fired point blank in Ab's face. He uttered a yell and released his hold, falling backward ingloriously; and then the equestrienne turned the direction of the weapon and gave Arad the benefit of another cylinder.

She appeared to be able to act with surprising judgment, for the next step was as well considered as if she had nothing but pleasant matters on her mind. She gave the horse a clip, and he sprang away with a long bound.

"After them!" gasped Arad, in dismay.

But Ab was floundering on the ground, and out of the game for the time being. He scrambled up in time to see his brother dashing off in pursuit, but that it was a vain chase was very clear.

The horse was going like the racer he was, and Arad was not in the affair, at all.

Ab naturally followed, but not until the escaped girl was within the town limits and out of danger did he succeed in coming up with Arad. Then the latter paused in dismay and rage. He panted as he never had done before after a run so short, and from his throat came strange guttural sounds which were only inarticulate expressions of rage.

"She's got away!" was Ab's brilliant remark.

Arad turned on him in fury.

"Got away? Yes; she has, an' it's all your fault, you fool! Got away, an' with her goes all our hopes o' keepin' this thing quiet. We shall now wind up at the gallows, an' that is where we ought ter be with a fool in the family!"

"What did I do about it?" demanded Ab, hotly.

"Do? Why didn't you hold that hoss by the rein?"

"Hold him? Wal, one side o' my face is shot away, an' the other ain't much better, I reckon. I ain't bullet-proof, by gum! Durn you! why didn't you stop the brute?"

"I didn't hev no chance. You let him git away."

"Wal, why didn't you grapple on ter him an' hold him?"

"She fired at me—"

"Wal, b'durn! I reckon she fired at me! Ef she didn't, a streak o' lightnin' came down from the sky an' burnt my hair off. Say, one side o' my face is roast beef, an' t'other is powder. Yes; why didn't I hold him!"

Abner's manner was full of fine irony, and Arad suddenly came to his senses.

"We waste talk," he confessed. "I suppose we may both be excused. Our worst error was in supposing that since a gal was not known ter be an Amazon, she must be a clam. This one wa'n't; she was a tiger!"

Ab caressed his wounded cheek and said nothing. His mind was a trifle less bent on love-making than it had been. Like Arad he had not been touched by any bullet, but he had been scorched, and the powder had burned.

For a long while Arad stood in silence. When he spoke his voice was calm.

"This has been a bad miss!" he declared.

"We can't get her now, an' I s'pose the whole town will soon know she sent a messenger to the Shaft who didn't never get hyar. Then it will be looked inter. It will be suspected he met with

foul play. Some one will be suspected ez hevin' done it. Who? Who, but us?"

"We git blamed fer everything!" snapped Ab, indignantly.

"Et will be looked inter. Ef the truth is found—Wal, you know!"

"Say, we may git her yet!" cried Ab.

"She won't sleep a wink ter-night."

"I don't mean ter-night; some other time."

Ab was thinking only of acquiring one he could compel to be the object of his affections—or what he called such—but Arad looked deeper. Perhaps all was not yet lost. She had come to Shadow Shaft under peculiar conditions. Perhaps something might occur so they could win after all.

"Et's no use ter cry over spilt milk," he finally remarked. "We'll go home an' keep quiet. Ter-morrer we kin get some notion of how things are goin'. We may yet come out at the top o' the heap."

Ab brightened up. His wooing had begun under circumstances a trifle stormy, but he was not to be discouraged. Little affairs of unpleasant nature ought not to weigh against a young woman when one thinks of marrying her.

"Yes, we'll go home," Arad went on. "Come; she may get a search-party out ter look fer us, an' it would be embarrassin' ter run up ag'inst them. Le's make tracks!"

And they hastened toward the resort of the Cast-off Crew.

In the mean while the woman rider had gone on and reached the hotel. No light showed at the place, but she was not long in getting attention. Men appeared, and she and her horse were duly cared for. There was but little she wanted that night; only a bed and safe place to rest.

A short time before she had hoped for more. Although she arrived at such an untimely hour she really had felt strong hopes that Leland Sherwin would be there to receive her. He was not, so she could only retire and wait for the morning.

When in her room and safe behind closed doors she suddenly stopped short.

"My assailants!" she exclaimed. "I had forgotten them!"

Sure enough; she had been thinking of Leland so much—hoping for his appearance, and then yielding to disappointment because he did not come, that she had utterly forgotten the ruffians of the pass.

"Never mind," was her decision. "Why should I think of them, anyhow? I have matters far more important to occupy my attention."

It was a singular way for a lady to look at such a matter, and especially one like Zylpha Mayne. She would not ordinarily have been credited with courage enough to pass lightly over an attack from ruffians at night. True, she was not a weak appearing person, but, in a general way, she was refined, delicate, sensitive and unused to wild life—if appearances went for anything.

Very sober was her face as she sat down to think; and that her thoughts were not pleasant was shown by the fact that she soon rose and began to move about the room in an excited way. Several times she made the circuit, but finally she paused as abruptly as she had started.

"This is folly!" she exclaimed. "There may have been a dozen good reasons why he did not come. I will not think ill of him without visible cause."

With this resolution she made ready to retire.

In the morning she was up in good season. She had not the means of making an elaborate toilet, which would have been hers had she possessed a more extensive wardrobe than that at hand, but she did make the most of her opportunities. Her care was not thrown away. Nature had done much for her, and when she had finished she certainly looked very charming. Woman-like, she tried the effect in the glass, but not with any signs of coquetry. Deeper thoughts occupied her mind.

"Only a few persons were to be seen on the street, but she sat down by the window and began to watch. Each one came under her attention, but none long held it.

She called for breakfast at an hour which surprised the landlord, since women like her were not in the habit of showing ambition under his roof. She ate the meal, and then went back to the window of her own room.

Her vigil began anew.

Slowly the hours moved on. Her face grew more sober, and, it seemed, anxious. Plainly matters were not going to suit her. The street was full of passers now, but none was of interest to her. What she hoped for did not occur.

The hour was fast approaching noon when she was aroused from her gloomy inactivity. Down the street, heading toward the hotel, came a man with quick steps. Her face first brightened and then flushed.

"It is he!" she exclaimed.

Leland Sherwin was the traveler.

Zylpha rose and stood in a state of expectancy which showed off her many charms to good effect.

"He has been busy," she murmured. "He never had any idea of not coming!"

He was opposite the hotel. She expected him

to look up, but he did not. Instead, he went on, with his strong step, looking only straight ahead. On!—and past the building!

Zylpha's expression changed. The joy faded from her face; her whole appearance underwent a great and sudden change.

"Just Heaven! he is not coming!" she gasped.

He was not. He went on toward his office, and she was left to explain it the best she could. To her there was but one way of explanation. He did not want to see her, and did not intend to.

The weary waiting was as nothing to the feelings of that moment. She had hoped for the best; she had expected notice because, in spite of certain things, there seemed the best of reasons why she should receive notice; and now—now, all was lost!

Resting heavily in her chair she gazed blankly from the window; but hope dies hard. Anon she rallied.

"He was in a hurry; he may be going to send some word," she thought. "I will not wrong him. He is a busy man, but—he will send word!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE VAIN SACRIFICE.

ZYLPHA caught at the new hope and watched again, but time wore on and no one came. Her courage wavered; her grief grew. Why did she get no tidings from the man she had aided?

"I have beggared myself for him by sending the ten thousand dollars," she murmured. "It was all I had, yet I gave it willingly. I hope it helped him when he needed help. Now, I want at least some acknowledgment of my sacrifice. Why don't he come?"

If he came not the dinner hour did, but she gave it no heed. A cheap boarder she bade fair to be for the landlord.

At two o'clock her mood began to change. She was forbearing, but under the effects of supposed neglect the ten thousand dollars began to grow in her estimation. She sat down and wrote the following note:

"MR. SHERWIN:—I am at the Glory Gideon Hotel."

Simply that and nothing more. Then she called a servant and made arrangements to have the brief message delivered. She saw the man—a Chinaman—go; then she again waited. John came back in due time. He had been instructed to wait for an answer. He brought it. Sherwin had read the note.

"What mummery is this?" he had demanded of John Chinaman.

The latter was not able to answer the vague question.

"Who sent it?" Sherwin next asked.

A lady, he had been told.

"Well," quoth Leland, looking disdainfully at the missive, "my office is right here. If any one wants to see me, I am to be found here. I don't go out to work!"

It was the irritable reply of a man in trouble, but Zylpha could not know that. She was in trouble, too, and the rebuff was a severe blow.

"He has my ten thousand dollars!" she thought, resentfully. "Does he want to cast me off, now? He must know who is at the hotel, for I wrote I would be here. I can't endure everything. Here, John; wait!"

Once more she sat down to write, and this was the result:

"LELAND SHERWIN:—You may not want to see me, but I want to see you! I do not wish to accuse you, but I will say I am greatly surprised at your conduct. I will not refer to the money for your aid, but I think even on the score of old acquaintance I am entitled the privilege of asking to see you without being used in a manner so indifferent—to term it mildly. Am I not?"

ZYLPHA MAYNE.

Once more the Chinaman was sent on his way. The result was soon to be seen. Leland appeared in the distance and rapidly neared the hotel.

"His face is dark!" thought Zylpha. "Can it be he—"

She did not complete the sentence, and Leland was soon in the room. She arose—they stood face to face.

It needed no word from him for her to see the interview was to open against her. They were acquaintances, yet he did not advance to take her hand. Retaining his sour expression, he abruptly exclaimed:

"Well, have you gone crazy?"

"Crazy?" she repeated.

"That's what I said!"

It was what he had said, though he had an instinctive, rather than positive, feeling that he ought to be ashamed of it, for whatever were the facts, he was in the presence of a lady. Zylpha's opinion was not instinctive; it was positive, and it could not be otherwise.

Her eyes sparkled with anger.

"Is this the way you receive me?" she demanded.

"What else could you expect," apologetically returned Leland, "when you send such an incomprehensible summons to me?"

"Incomprehensible?"

"Yes."

Zylpha regarded him in silence until the power of the look moved him to ask with manifest uneasiness:

"Did you really expect your first note to bring me here?"

"It seems it did not."

"Why should it?"

"You think there was no reason?"

"I know of none."

Zylpha sat down. She had no words with which to continue this conversation. Then Leland, looking more than ever perplexed, added:

"How was I to know the first note was from you?"

"Didn't you expect me to-day?"

"Expect you? Certainly not. Why should I?"

"Perhaps you will say you have not heard from me in the last month?"

"I have not heard from you in the last six months, directly or indirectly. If you sent me any word, I failed to get it."

The last words were in form of an afterthought, and brought out by the expression he noticed on her face. It was one he could not read with exactness, but it told a good deal.

"I wrote you twice," she said, faintly.

"Did you mail the letters yourself?"

"I sent them by special messenger."

"Then your messenger did not think it worth his while to execute the trust. I have not seen him or the letters."

"But it was Job Joy. He would not neglect his trust."

A shadow flitted over Leland's face.

"Not if he was alive and in good health," he confessed. "This may be serious. Did he have anything with him which would tempt a robber?—any considerable sum of money? But of course you would not know."

Zylpha had risen, but she again dropped into the seat. She did know, and all too well. She had taken her last dollar from a place of safety to loan to Leland, and done it without a selfish thought, but as she saw—if Leland was telling the truth—that it had been lost, she suddenly and sharply realized that ten thousand dollars was a big sum of money. And it had been her all.

Again Sherwin seemed to read her expression.

"Do you fear Job Joy has been murdered for his possessions?—his horse, perhaps; for he liked a good horse."

"I fear," cried Zylpha, with sudden vehemence, "he has been murdered for the ten thousand dollars which was to have saved you!"

"To have saved me?"

"Yes, yes; I sent it to you! I heard of your need; I drew my last money from the bank, and sent Job with all possible haste to deliver it to you. Do you really mean you have not got it?"

"I have not seen or heard from it!"

"Then it is gone forever, and poor Job with it! My true old friend!—my poor old Job!"

There was momentary silence. Zylpha was dismayed, and Leland looked as if he felt the same way. Whether he was giving thought to Job or the money, he did not explain. After awhile he spoke again:

"Why should you send the money to me?"

"I heard you had been trying to borrow and had failed."

"But you—why should you risk your small means?"

"It may have been small, but it was just what I had heard you were seeking to secure as a loan, and I wanted to help you."

"Miss Mayne, I am surprised. I could not expect this of you."

"You did not get it, it seems."

"Most unfortunately, I did not."

"Then I have done you no good."

Leland Sherwin gazed at the speaker in wonder. As he had said, he could not expect it of her. All had not been pleasant in their lives, in the past, and he had judged her with severity. In spite of that fact, she had come to his aid when his business friends had not. More than that, if he had secured the ten thousand dollars, it would have saved him from the financial peril he had been in—from the greater peril which now menaced him.

It was almost incredible.

He had condemned her in the past. Was this the way she would reward him?

Then old doubts returned, and he asked himself, "Was her story true?"

"When did you send it?" he inquired, aloud.

She named the date.

"Job took it and came in person," she added.

"He rode on horseback. He has a sister somewhere up country; I know not where; and from here he was going to visit her. I did not ask him to report his safe arrival at Shadow Shaft, for I thought I should hear from you."

"You would; you would, at once, had I received it!" declared Leland, with emphasis, thinking of what the money would have saved him from. "But I never got it, and I have not seen Job in Shadow Shaft. It looks bad for him. Was he to come over the mountains alone?"

"I know not; I only know he took the money and started. He also bore a note to you."

"Why didn't you write me by mail at the same time?"

"I—I thought I would not!"

To the banker, accustomed to doing business in set business ways, the matter began to look

more suspicious. He would not have sent funds as she said. He could not see why she should. Zylpha thought how her modesty had led her to take what seemed to her the least obtrusive way.

Now, she had cause to regret the modesty.

Her faithful Job still seemed the safest of all means of sending, but she certainly ought to have notified Sherwin by mail, if she chose the irregular method of conveyance, or any other method.

"Tell me all about this," Leland requested.

Zylpha did tell all; all except the love for this man which had led her to the step. If the love was not confessed, it was clear she had cared enough for him to make a great sacrifice for him—if the money had been sent as she claimed.

But Leland listened with growing incredulity. He knew she fancied him. He knew, too, he had doubted her in the past, and, doubting, had used her so that she could not look upon him with the feelings of one who never had been used with asperity.

He would have hated one who had treated him thus. Could it be she did otherwise—that she would trust ten thousand dollars to the man who had snubbed her?

Perhaps he was not blameworthy for doubting. In any case he did doubt.

"Well," he finally commented, brusquely, "all you've done has been to lose your cash!"

"So it seems."

"You should have sent it by the usual channels. Job Joy was as honest as a Bible patriarch, but he was not the man to fight highwaymen. I fancy we have seen the last of Job and the money."

Zylpha's heart sunk. It was bad enough to lose the ten thousand dollars, but the fact that, instead of showing appreciation of the favor she had tried to do, Leland's bluff and indifferent manner cut her as nothing else did.

There was not a trace of sympathy or gratitude in his manner, nor did he refer to the sacrifice she had made, and made so unfortunately.

Poor Zylpha wished she was back at her home, where she could hide her wretched head and her sorrows.

CHAPTER X.

A NEW ALLIANCE.

ZYLPHA sat looking at vacancy with unseeing eyes until Leland suddenly spoke again:

"Business calls me away now, but I'll make inquiries and see if any one had noticed Job around here. It is not at all likely he has been within miles of Shadow Shaft, but inquiry is a due formality. If I learn anything I'll let you know."

He moved toward the door, and then paused at the threshold in a formal manner.

"I suppose you have been well since I saw you last?" he asked, like a machine.

"As well as usual," returned Zylpha, faintly.

"You will find the air of Shadow Shaft very beneficial to you. We have an exceedingly healthful place, I assure you. Good-afternoon!"

He bowed formally and went out. Descending the stairs he gave his thoughts full play.

"A very neat scheme for a woman!" he decided, "but it won't go down. Sent me ten thousand dollars? Gammon! Her game won't work! It is very transparent to a business man. Really, I did not think her capable of such a small trick."

Then Zylpha went out of the banker's mind suddenly, as he saw a certain person in the distance. It was Gabe Gall, walking jauntily along the street.

"Curse the fellow!" Leland muttered, "he keeps in my sight like some loathsome reptile. Why am I thus persecuted by every one?"

He really felt himself a persecuted man, but if he could have read Zylpha's heart, he would have changed his opinion on one point. When he went out she remained gazing at the closed door as if she could still see, but not touch, or speak to him.

"Deserted and scorned!" she whispered. "Where is the invitation I dreamed I might receive? He did not even give me one word of encouragement. He said not a word of thanks; he did not even indicate that he was grateful for the favor I tried to do him!"

She sunk into a chair, and then, as the whole miserable interview seemed to flash before her eyes, she burst into tears.

"Not one word of good will!" she sobbed.

For awhile she could not think clearly, but as she grew a little more composed, a suspicion of the truth began to dawn upon her.

"Can it be he did not believe what I said?" she wondered. "Does he think I spoke falsely when I said I sent the money? Oh! no; he would not be so cruel as that, and yet—Whatever has been in the past, he ought to have given me credit for something, if he did believe me."

She considered further and arrived at a decision.

"He does think I am lying; that I never sent it. That's the only way to explain it. He does not believe, and this after all my sacrifice! It is cruel, cruel!"

Pride and anger began to spur her drooping spirits on, and she arose and paced the room

with steps firm and quick. Woman-like, she could endure a good deal from the man she loved, but he had asked too much of her endurance.

After a long while she returned to her seat. She was calm again, if not happy.

"Am I to endure this meekly?" she asked, aloud. "When I have begged myself for him, is it right for him to accuse me of falsehood? He could learn the truth of a part of my claim by sending to see if I had taken my money from the bank. It would not be proof that I had sent it to him, but it would go for something, or ought to. Could he not have used me with civility until he knew I was not worthy of it?"

Leland Sherwin was in danger of losing one of his most devoted adherents, then, what and her purpose was in regard to him was not made clear in her final decision on other matters. Her face was suddenly lighted by a new idea, and she exclaimed:

"If I live I will yet bring to him proof that he has wronged me deeply. Unless the facts are hidden from the eyes of the world forever he shall be brought to know the truth. It shall be the undertaking of my lifetime!"

The idea once gained soon became a passion. Before, she had been actuated by regard for him; now, pride and resentment proved equally strong. She thought far less of the lost money than was to be expected.

She found herself placed in a way not to her liking. She had not the hoped-for position in the Sherwin house, and must be content to reside in the hotel for a time.

Content! The word did not apply; she could not be that; even then the walls of the room looked hateful to her.

"I must go out," she exclaimed. "I must have freer air to breathe, and I'll make a pretense of seeing the town."

The resolution once taken, she threw on her outer garments and left the hotel. Strangers in Shadow Shaft usually found the streets of the town of interest, but Zylpha cared nothing for such things, then. She wanted to be alone, and to this end she made haste to leave the busy part of the place.

Not until she had reached the extreme northern side did she remember her adventure of the previous night, but this, when remembered, did not discourage her from going on.

"What does it matter if I am beset by ruffians?" she bitterly asked herself. "I have lost interest in life; I may as well lose life, itself. Nothing is left for me, now!"

Indulging these thoughts she went on until she was in a remote locality. There she sat down and fell into meditation. Time and again she went over the past. Nowhere in the review did she find a ray of hope.

Considerable time had passed when she heard the sound of footsteps. She could not move in time to avoid the meeting, if one was to come, so she sat perfectly quiet and pretended not to know she was threatened.

Within a few feet of her came the unknown. There he paused, as she could tell without looking. Look she did not, but gazed steadfastly at the ground. Several seconds passed, and then a mild voice arose with the comment:

"This is a beautiful place for specimens."

Zylpha thought she was termed a "specimen," but she deigned to looked up, for the voice had been gentle and pleasant. She saw some one in keeping with the voice—in brief, "Dreamer Dick" Huse.

He quietly added:

"I think you are interested in specimens?"

Stranger though the slight youth was, Zylpha was led to make a gracious reply.

"What kind of specimens?" she asked.

"Rocks, plants, and other things. I like them!" declared Dick, with enthusiasm. "Men are uncertain, but specimens are not. Nature is a thing all would do well to pattern after. If we all did that, this would be a better world."

"You are a geologist and botanist?"

"I try to be."

Dick shoved his hand into his pocket and brought out specimens galore. There were rocks and plants, all arranged so they would not suffer in the carrying.

Zylpha did not care for such things, but she had studied both sciences when at school. She was well-informed for a mere scholar, and the gentle ways of the boy, and his appearance of simplicity, appealed to her. She did not know him, but she would talk to him on a subject in which he was manifestly interested.

It would please him, and help to pass the time for her.

She began. Now, Dick had found an active sympathizer in Ruth Sherwin, at all times, but she knew nothing about such things, and except for her no one at the town had ever given Dick the least consideration in his passion. In Zylpha he found one both sympathetic and well informed.

The result was that he was soon in the seventh heaven of joy. He compared notes with her, and became oblivious to all else. One who could and would talk of his beloved specimens, was a person to be admired more than kings or queens, in his opinion. A long while they were thus

engaged. Zylpha found it as pleasant as anything she could expect, and his simplicity made her feel there was one who was not actuated by selfish motives.

Finally he aroused to other thoughts.

"You don't live at Shadow Shaft," he remarked.

"No."

"Only just come?"

"That is all."

"Going to stop?"

"For a few days."

"I would like to have you come and see me and my collection. I live over there."

"Where?"

His somewhat vague motion had awakened sudden interest on her part, and her question was eager.

"At Leland Sherwin's," Dick explained, unsuspectingly. "My mother is housekeeper there. It's a fine place to live in, and if you will come to see me I will introduce you to Ruth. I don't know whether Leland would be glad to see you or not, but she is real good and kind. She don't know one specimen from another, I am sorry to say, but she always helps every one. Now, I'll tell her there is a strange young lady in camp, and I'll bet she will call on you right away. She's just that way. You can see Leland, too—"

"No, no!" Zylpha exclaimed. "Not for the world!"

Dick looked at her in mild surprise.

"He wouldn't bite you."

"Of course not."

"Do you know him?"

Zylpha was not prepared to confess that she did, so she had to reply in the negative.

"You spoke as if you did," remarked the youth. "There are some who don't like Leland, but there's worse men in Shadow Shaft than he. True, he don't care for specimens, but that's because he never was educated up to it. Did you say you didn't know him?"

"I did say so."

Dick studied her face for some time in silence. It was clear that he doubted the statement, somewhat, but he did not press the suspicion.

"We have high old times at Sherwin's," he went on, after a pause. "They keep me there because I'm foolish!"

"You foolish?"

"So they say, and a wise idiot never disputes with those who give him enough to eat."

"I doubt that you are anything of the kind. We all have our peculiarities, but who shall say who is the wisest among us?"

"I would say it was you," decided Dick, gravely. "Ruth is the best person I know of, but she isn't wise like you. You suit me well, and I am going to stick to you like a poor relation."

Zylpha did not rebuff him. A friend inside Sherwin's house was something which might yet come in very useful to her. So she continued to talk kindly to Dreamer Dick, and succeeded in making stronger than ever the chain of devotion which bound him to her.

CHAPTER XI.

FROM WORDS TO BLOWS.

GABE GALL left the town and went up the steep acclivity next to the hut of the Cast-off Crew. He did not know who lived there, but proceeded to find out in the airy, confident way peculiar to him. He walked up to the door of the edifice just in time to meet Amazon Moll, as she chanced to come out.

This unamiable woman resented all intrusion on her premises, and now proceeded to fix a severe stare upon the Gambolier from Great Hump.

Unmoved thereby, he took off his hat very politely.

"Madam," quoth he, "may I ask who resides in this palatial nook of the mountains?"

"No; you may not!" snapped Moll.

"Indeed! Is there any patent rights, or forty-two-year copyright on it?"

"I don't know what trash you are talking, but you needn't repeat it. Get out!"

"My dear madam, you misunderstand the purport of my parishional call. I am not the tax-collector, or the butcher's boy—far from it; my days of youth are fled, or on the quiver. I am simply a meek and lowly book-agent; a man loved by all and respected by some who don't know me well. I am selling a work descriptive of the great painting, 'Washington Crossing the Delaware,' a work which is in more homes than Fox's 'Book of Martyrs' could shake a stick at. This great work—"

Several times Amazon Moll had tried to get a word into the conversation herself, but in vain. For once she had met her match in the voluble Gambolier, so far as words were concerned, and Gabe simply talked her down. She finally lost temper wholly. Seizing a club, she shouted:

"You hush up, or there'll be a funeral here. Don't you give me any more of your talk, or I'll smash you! You hear?"

She was waving the weapon close to his head, but the man of gall did not even wink.

"By pricking up my ears I have succeeded in hearing all," he serenely replied. "This book

would prove of untold benefit to you and your children—"

"Durn you and your old book!" shouted the Amazon. "Will you hush up? If you say 'book' to me again, I'll club you from one end of the town to the other!"

"Book is a word which shall not pass my lips. Book is a word I don't know and never heard. Let me assure you I won't say book, for I know nothing about a book. Madam, it is clear as mud that you don't need any book. Right; you shall not hear the word."

Gabe kept up the reiteration of the monosyllable with careless unconcern. His manner never had been more easy and good-natured.

"Do you see that trail?" asked Moll, pointing to the town.

"Yes, madam."

"Git!"

"Git! what?"

"Git out!"

"That is plain enough," agreed the Gambolier, smiling amiably. "You have some errand you want me to do. Well, I shall be glad to help you, but give me time to rest my fevered blood, first. I am a stranger in Shadow Shaft, and climbing these hills raises the dickens with my machine for breathing. The town ought to fix some easier way for you to get up here—cable cars, or something of the sort. Hang it all! poor folks don't get any show in this world!"

He had at last struck a subject of interest to Amazon Moll, and she looked at him with less of ferocity.

"You don't look like a poor person," she objected.

"My tailor says I am; mighty poor pay. He and I agree on the subject. Yes; I'm poor in pocket, but rich in spirit."

"What do you want here?"

"I want to be sociable."

"You can't, with me; I don't get that way with any one."

"Shows your good sense. I'm that way, myself; very cold and reserved in my manner; kind of out o' love with my fellow men, and not wholly mashed on my fellow women. See?"

"I see you make too much cheap talk. You're not wanted here, and the sooner you get away, the better it will be for you. Git!"

Moll stuck to her decision, but her voice was less aggressive than before. Gabe was encouraged to proceed further, but they were interrupted. Footsteps sounded, and Lute Huse came along the trail.

He stared in astonishment at sight of the Gambolier.

"My old man!" explained Moll, in a low voice. "You want to skip, or your mother will bury her pet son before the cows go home the day!"

It was not an encouraging statement, but Mr. Gall remained as cool and smiling as ever.

"Hallo, sport!" he saluted, confidently. "Been out for an airing? Well, a fellow *will* get musty if he don't get the breezes into his wardrobe once or twice a week."

Lute stopped short and stared at the Gambolier. There was hostility in his gaze, too.

"What're you doin' hyer?" he growled.

"Trying to sell your good woman a patent clothes-wringer, sir. I have the agency for this region, and I'm going to introduce the unrivaled gem in every household. The thing is a novelty in its way. Instead of washing the garments, you simply wring them out, and as the dirt stays in, it makes a firm surface which prevents the clothes from ever wearing out. You save ninety-nine per cent by actual count!"

Lute pointed to the town.

"Git!" he briefly ordered.

"Who?"

"Git out!"

"What? Oh! I reckon I catch on to your meaning. Yes; I did get a good many orders down there."

"Don't you stand there and play the monkey to me!" shouted Lute. "Git! or I'll break your head!"

"My head is all right," amiably returned Gabe. "What is eating you, anyhow? I'm the best friend you've got in the burgh. Come; sit down and let us see how nearly our opinions agree on the question of missionaries in Africa!"

Lute could stand no more. He suddenly sprang at Gabe and caught him in a tenacious hold. It was his intention to hurl the Gambolier to the ground, but the plan miscarried, somehow. Gabe stepped partly to one side and caught Lute's collar as the latter passed, and then it came to pass that the assailant fell to the ground, himself.

"Hallo!" quoth Gabe, "you tripped over something, didn't you?"

Lute looked up in wrath and bewilderment. He could not understand how one who did not look large enough to give him any kind of a battle had so summarily disposed of him, but it had been done—that was sure. He rose slowly.

"Say, do you know what you've done?" he demanded.

"I wasn't aware I had done anything," innocently responded Gabe. "If you refer to your fall, I assure you I had no part in it."

"Critter," slowly but distinctly enunciated Huse, "you've done me harm on my own premises. Do you think I'll stand that?"

"Bless me! I haven't done anything of the sort. You are laboring under some kind of a misunderstanding, old man. My feet are big, but I don't believe they hung over *this* time."

Lute drew a revolver.

"I'm a square fighter," he announced, "an' I don't go fer no man without giving him a chance, but we've got ter settle this. Draw a gun, an' we'll git it off our hands right away!"

"This isn't my week for gunning, and I never fight with anything smaller than cannon. Bring a Gatling gun, and I might consent to accommodate you if I'm *not* in full dress."

Lute drew a second revolver and flung one at Gabe's feet.

"You can't get out o' this!" he declared.

"You've insulted me on my own lands, an' now I demand satisfaction!"

"Lute Huse, you're a fool!" declared Amazon Moll. "What do you mean by kickin' up a row hyer? It's all your own fault there was any trouble. Can't you take your medicine, when you order it, yourself? Simmer down, and get a little horse sense into you!"

Mr. Huse was not flattered by this address, and he proceeded to do some tall shouting, but Moll had taken the matter in hand and he did not get any sympathy from her.

He was ordered to subside, and she carried the day.

"Wal, as long as this feller apologized, I won't be hard on him," Lute finally agreed.

Gabe had not apologized, but he let the intimidation go. He seemed too good-natured to quarrel with any one.

"I'm glad to know you, old man!" he declared, "and I'll stop in often while I'm in camp. I sort of like your way."

Gabe was as much at home as in Leland Sherwin's parlor, and he proceeded to talk in his usual style. Smiling amiably, full of his jests and overflowing with life, he actually warmed Lute into something like civility before he made a motion to leave. When he did, he genially declared:

"I'm going to call on you often. This life is just about my size, an' you folks are white to the collar. Thank you; I *will* call!"

Nobody had invited him, but his assurance was proof against all such small things. He said a few more friendly things, and then went down the slope.

"May he fall an' break his neck!" muttered Lute.

"Quarrelsome as ever!" complained Moll.

"See here, old woman, he hangs out at Sherwin's. Want ter be intimate with sech? Wal, I don't."

The Amazon had grown sober-faced.

"What's he doin' at Sherwin's?"

"Who knows? I don't; I only know he is there. I don't know as he or Lele Sherwin has any desire to do us harm, but they ain't of our kind, an' you know we always have lived in the expectation of gettin' drove out o' town."

"I don't like it fer a man from Sherwin's ter come around hyer," Moll agreed. "They ain't ever showed that interest in us before. Get your mother ter spy on the gang a bit. No; get Dick; they would not be so apt to suspect him."

"Dick?" exclaimed Lute, in disgust. "That fool? Why, he don't know enough ter eat without bein' told. Him, a spy? Wal, he would be a corker, he would!"

"Dick is a fool," Moll frankly agreed, "but he might see some things others wouldn't."

"Yes; an' he might go an' tell them we were wantin' him ter do the spy act. None o' that in mine. Dick can't help me; no fool can."

Conversation turned upon Gabe Gall again, but they reached no satisfactory decision in regard to him. His visit might mean nothing, and it might mean much.

"Anyhow, we ain't done nothin' ter be blamed fer," remarked Lute, righteously. "You won't find a clearer record than ours!"

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE STORY.

THE following morning Mr. Gabe Gall was late at breakfast, and he had to eat alone. This did not annoy him. His good humor was proof against all things, and if he felt he had not received due attention as a guest, he did not allow any one to see the fact.

He was very sociable with the servant, and won fresh honor in that quarter. Afterward, he smoked a good cigar with much relish. This done, he sauntered into the housekeeper's room.

Dorcas Huse looked at him in amazement. That an outsider should invade her sacred premises was surprising.

"Well, good soul, how goes it?" the Gambolier lightly asked.

"How goes what?" demanded Dorcas sourly.

"Life, and yourself."

"Is that all you've got to say?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"No; it ain't. When I am here I have no time to waste on any one. This is my busy place, and it's against all rule and precedent for anybody to intrude on me here."

"A very good idea!" declared Gabe. "Of course you have to have some such rule, or there would be no peace for you."

"Don't you approve of people living up to the rule?"

"Certainly."

"You don't seem to do it."

"Oh! I only dropped in to be sociable. It's all right. You and I understand each other; I am like a child who wants to get a stray cake. I'm glad you keep outsiders out, for I can enjoy myself here a good deal better. We are cozy, and no meddlers need apply!"

He had seated himself on the edge of the table, and was swinging his feet as if he had found the topmost notch of happiness. His audacity dumfounded Dorcas. She knew how to deal with such persons, if the truth was but known, but it required decisive measures, and she had a mild role to sustain at Sherwin's.

Now, she was angry at Gabe for his assurance, but could not help feeling a measure of admiration for that very quality.

"A mighty well kept room!" quoth Mr. Gall. "If I ever get to running a house of my own, I shall try to get you away from Sherwin to manage my own mansion."

"I won't go!"

"No? Suppose I offer you double what Leland pays? But we will not dwell on that now; I haven't got the mansion. When I have, I shall look for the birds to inhabit it."

Gabe appropriated a bit of spirit Dorcas was going to use in her cooking, and then went on with the conversation. There he stuck, all of her hints being thrown away. It seemed that only force could drive him out.

The sequel indicated that he might have come there to say something in particular, but it took a long while to get around to it. Anon, he yawned and inquired:

"My good soul, do you believe in ghosts?"

"Bah!" retorted Dorcas.

"Which is Greek for No, if I understand the dead languages aright, and I fancy I understand as much as is safe. No ghost in yours, eh?"

"No ghost."

"I used to be skeptical before I came here," remarked Gabe, looking thoughtfully at vacancy.

"Have you seen a ghost here?" asked Dorcas, regarding him sharply.

"As near as I can figure it, I have."

"Where? When?"

Dorcas betrayed unusual interest. She had ceased all work, and stood gazing at him with eagerness.

One of Mrs. Huse's peculiarities was the possession of eyes of a very pale blue. These eyes at times took on a very strange appearance, and seemed to shimmer and change like the waves of a rippling stream. It was the only sign of emotion that ever marked her manner, for, outside of that, she was a marvel of self-control. Rarely, too, did she betray even this emotion, but Gabe had in some way interested her.

The Gambolier yawned again and drawled:

"The 'where,' in my room; the 'when,' last night."

"And you saw a ghost?"

"Madam, I am not aware that I'm superstitious. I do not stand sponsor for any ghost, goblin or gimcrack; but I saw some uncanny form. I say not what it was, for I know not. I give a diagram with my revelation, but no chromos and no certificates of phantom genealogy."

"What was it like?"

"A large man, or his ghost."

"In your room?"

"Yes."

"What did he do?"

"I did most of the doing," nonchalantly replied Gabe. "I asked him for his pedigree and a chart of his voyage to my room, but he did not pan out over ten per cent. as a narrator. In brief, he said never a word, and I am left to wonder whether he was flesh, fish or fowl."

"Will you have done with your nonsense?" sharply demanded Dorcas. "You mean something. What?"

"Simply that I don't want any more prowlers in my room at the dead hour of night. Even a graveyard would object to such business."

Mrs. Huse came close to the Gambolier and her eyes shimmered more than ever.

"Man," she demanded, in a low voice, "did you really see what you assert?"

"I did, or I imagined it. Which?"

"Tell me about it!"

"There isn't much to unfold; I wish there was. I awoke to find this portly gentleman making free with my premises. He was mooning around near the bureau, and seemed to be looking for something."

"I lay quiet for awhile, but the idea grew upon me that I ought to have some part in the matter, especially as he did not seem to progress for a cent. I raised my voice and said I:

"If you don't see what you want, ask for it!"

"This ought to have satisfied ghost or man, but this critter just turned and looked at me and said nothing. He had big eyes of a kind of far-away style, and they didn't look pretty."

"I spoke again:

"If you're looking for a place to sleep, I'll sit on the window-sill and let my feet hang off while you rest in my bed."

"Again I seemed to have done the pretty, but

the outrageous chap was deaf to me and gratitude. He remained as mute as a mouse in a country minister's pantry.

"Well, I lay there and cogitated for awhile, thinking what more I could do to make him feel at home, and, also, to nab him and hale him before the burghers of the municipality—for I did intend to put him through for burglary—but the fellow got the bulge on me, finally.

"He went to a remote corner of the room, and I lost sight of him in the dim light. When he seemed due for another appearance I got up to see what he was doing, but I slipped a cog.

"I'll be darned if he hadn't gone and left no sign. I was alone in the room, and all my search failed to develop the fellow after that. Gone and left no sign, by George!"

Gabe had had an attentive auditor.

With still-shimmering eyes Dorcas had listened to all he said, and listened raptly.

He finished, and she started as from a spell.

"And that is all?" she questioned, disappointedly.

"All? I think it enough of the kind. Yes; it's all."

"This man—what was he like? It is not enough that he was a large man; what more can you tell?"

"Nothing, I confess. You see, the light was very dim, and I had no chance to get on to small points."

There was a period of silence. Mrs. Huse looked only at vacancy, but there was some reason to suspect that the Gambolier's appearance of indifference might cover close survey of his companion.

"This is very strange!" murmured Dorcas, at last.

"Just my idea."

"Who could be in your room?"

"That's what I would like to know."

"Perhaps you can catch him on a second visit, if you keep quiet about this one. Whom have you told?"

"No one but you. Fact is, I thought perhaps Leland would feel I was unduly critical if I kicked on it, so I kept my mouth shut. But when I saw you I could not resist the temptation to consult one of the household."

"You did right, and you selected just the right person. As housekeeper it is my place to look to these things, and this I wish to do. As you say, we may well save others from worrying over it, as they surely would do if aware of all the facts. You and I will see to it ourselves, and we may be able to solve the mystery."

"We will try. And now, it was Philemon Bond who had the room before me, was it not?"

"Yes."

"And he disappeared strangely."

Mrs. Huse's eyes shimmered more than ever, and she took Gabe by the arm.

"You are a friend of Mr. Sherwin's," she remarked, "and you must have his interests close to your heart. Let me beg of you that you will not refer to the disappearance in the hearing of any one outside the house. Mr. Sherwin is a good man, and we ought to do all we can to lighten any burden he may have."

"Just my idea!" declared Mr. Gall, with enthusiasm. "Lele is one of the white hen's chickens, by Jove! Yes; and I'm ready to do all I can to help him along."

"You and I, then, may be able to do more than we think possible, now."

"We'll try it, anyhow."

Gabe spoke with enthusiasm, again, and though his sudden friendship might have surprised Leland, himself, his face gleamed with the Damon and Pythias spirit.

Dorcas had further questions to ask, but Gabe could not enlighten her. The interview had grown prolonged, and it was soon terminated. Mr. Gall lighted a cigar and left the room and the house.

Left alone, Dorcas seemed to meditate deeply, but while doing so, she watched the clock closely. When it had marked a certain time she made the circuit of the house and appeared to make sure just where each inmate was.

This done she hung out in the kitchen window a white cloth which did not seem to have any especial meaning, though Mrs. Huse seldom did anything without a good cause for it.

A little later, as Ruth Sherwin was sitting in the parlor she was surprised to see a man walk in very calmly—a man who was not to be expected there. Among the regular visitors of the family he had no place, and it was generally understood he had not the entree there, at all. It was Arad Huse.

Why had he come?

CHAPTER XIII.

RUTH HEARS STARTLING NEWS.

ARAD seemed to think he was not to have an agreeable welcome, for he put out his hand deprecatingly.

"Give me a chance to speak to you!" he urged. "It will pay you to do so."

"Did you wish to see your mother?" asked Ruth, somewhat coldly.

"I told you I wanted a chance to speak to you," Arad quickly returned. "I'm hyer on business."

Ruth did not have a good opinion of Arad, but she knew of no reason why she should refuse to let him have his say. She did not refuse, and her silence gave him permission.

"I don't want my mother to hear this," the miner went on. "It's a matter of more interest to you than any one else, an' that is why I hev come ter you. My advice is, keep it from the old woman."

"As I do not yet know to what you refer, I will hear you before I decide," was the reply.

Arad moved closer to the young lady and, looking around to see no one was within hearing, went on:

"I told the old woman I was goin' ter call, so that part ain't no secret, but she has no more idea what I have to say than the man in the moon. Of course you won't need ter deny I hev been hyer, ef she should see me, but don't let on what I say."

His repetitions and earnestness surprised Ruth anew, and she began to feel very curious to know what was coming.

"I will hear you," she again promised.

"Well, it's about Philemon Bond!" Arad whispered.

"What about him?" Ruth asked, curiously, but not with the deep interest of one who looks for an important revelation.

"He's missin', an' I begin ter suspect I may see how it come about."

"Hadn't you better see my brother concerning the case?" asked Ruth, growing doubtful, all at once.

"Not him, least of all."

Arad's continued air of mystery impressed Ruth and made her wish she had not agreed to listen, but it was too late to retreat, then.

"Well?" she questioned, without much encouragement in her voice.

Arad produced a knife from his pocket.

"D'ye know that?" he asked.

His voice was low and mysterious, but Ruth scarcely heeded him. Why should she know the knife? She looked at it with her interest aroused, at last. When she did so she needed no explanation in one respect.

The knife was not new in appearance. She recognized it even without the mark upon the handle, and that was plain enough, too. There, the name of Leland Sherwin was engraved on the silver plate.

A few months before she had purchased the weapon at Rooster Run, and given it to Leland. It had been done half in jest, for he never had carried anything of the sort, and she had made it a subject of banter. The knife had been presented with the advice that he go armed like a Western man, since he was one, and it had been received in the same spirit.

"How came you by this?" she asked.

"D'ye see the rust on the blade?"

"Yes."

"The knife has been out in the rain," Arad explained. "That I kin see, though I ain't got no proof of it. Et ain't laid long in the reach o' the elements, though. Mebbe it has been a week. Wal, where do ye s'pose I found it?"

"I don't know."

Ruth began to get uneasy. She had seen Leland put the weapon away after it was given to him, and had not expected him to take it out, if it was her gift, except for some special purpose.

"I'll tell ye," promised Arad. "Ter-day I was out in the hills, an' there I found somethin'."

"I was comin' along the little gulch west o' Bronson's mine, but in a part o' the region where nobody very often goes. Ez I started ter cross a runnin' brook, I all o' a sudden come onto somethin' which made me start back."

"Et was a dead man!"

The narrator lowered his voice still more, and it became so mysterious and unnatural that, added to his words, it gave Ruth a severe shock.

"A dead man!" she exclaimed.

"Nothin' shorter; a dead man layin' right by the brook, solitary an' alone."

He sighed—something none of the Cast-off Crew was in the habit of doing. This matter must have worked on his own feelings a good deal.

Leaning forward, Ruth whispered nervously:

"Who was this man?"

"I don't know. The wild beasts had been at him, an' et would be hard fer a man ter tell his own brother under the circumstances. Et is sartain he had fell right where he was, an' that makes it odd. Why was he in sech a lonely place?"

"You say he was by a stream. Is it not possible the body washed there from some other point?"

"It had not washed a foot, an' even ef it had, it wouldn't hev come from any spot where we are in the habit o' makin' free; we miners. The stream comes right from near Span Cone, an' you know that's as deserted a place as you kin find in a day's journey. But et didn't wash, nohow; he lay jest ez he fell."

Ruth seemed to tire of the long explanation.

"But you must have some idea who he was?" she questioned.

"I hev. When Philemon Bond was hyer, I see him. Of course I had no business with him, an' I took only casual notice o' him, in one sense o' the word; but I am a close observer, an' I

think I recognized Bond's clo'se in what the dead man had on."

"Well?"

Nervously Ruth asked the question. What did all this portend?

"Wal," returned Arad, "hyer's a paper I found by the body, half danglin' out o' one pocket. You kin read it."

He passed it over. First of all Ruth saw it was the remnant of a torn letter; next she saw, or thought she saw, it was in Leland Sherwin's handwriting. It gave her a shock, and she made haste to read. The fragment was as follows:

"I wish it was in my power to pay the amount named, but this has been a bad season with us. You know, friend Bond, that failures have been numerous. It is a dark period in financial pursuits. We have met with losses, ourselves, and the failure of others has embarrassed us seriously."

"We intend to deal squarely with the Consolidated Banking Company, but the cash we so unluckily invested in the ways I have named is not to be gathered in by magic in such hard times."

"I hope you will reconsider your decision and keep this matter from the knowledge of the Company for awhile. Do this, and we are saved. We rely upon you in this, Mr. Bond. Can't you help us out?"

"If the Company knew of our irregularity it would go hard with us, but you know as well as any one that our word is never broken lightly. We could not convince the Company as we can you, for the reason that they do not know us as you do."

"We are bound to act with honor, if you do insinuate to the contrary. Will you give us a chance?"

"Now, Mr. Bond, you are the only one who knows of our irregularity, or can know of it at present. Before the Company could get hold of the secret—except from you—we could make ourselves right."

"You hold our future in your hands. Will you save us? You say it is your duty to speak out at once. Say, rather, that if by keeping silent you can save honest men from ruin you will do a good deed and—"

Here the paper ended abruptly.

Ruth looked up and met Arad's gaze. Somehow, that gaze reminded her of one afflicted with hunger.

Arad tried to look sympathetic, but his face was not of the right kind. Those beetling brows were not of the sort which go with a tender heart.

"You found this by the body?" questioned Ruth.

"Yes, and this!"

He touched the knife—the knife with Leland's name upon it.

The union was striking and horribly suggestive.

Over the girl's mind came the purport of the letter. The writer told Philemon Bond therein that he, Bond, was the only one who could do him injury; the only holder of the secret; and he besought mercy which, according to his own statement, had been once refused by Bond.

Ruth shivered.

"I'm hyer ter help ye ef I kin!" declared Arad.

"What can you do?" mechanically asked the girl.

"We kin keep this matter secret."

"We certainly would not betray it!"

"Not ef we wanted ter keep Leland in safety."

"But others may find—"

"Miss, I'm goin' ter bury that body where nobody kin find it. The only question is, do you want ter see it afore I do the job?"

"I? No, no! I would not do that under any condition!"

"That's as you say," added Arad, in what he meant for a gentle voice. "Et don't matter, o' course, an' I reckon you an' me kin save yer brother ef it's on the hooks ter do it, anyhow."

There was that in Arad Huse's eyes which made Ruth look at him quickly—look with sudden fear. There was a vague something which bespoke trouble to come, if she read it aright.

"What can we do?" she asked, faintly.

"Wal, as I said, we kin keep quiet, an' we may be able ter do more. "Would you approve o' goin' ter yer brother with what we hev found out?"

"No; oh, no!"

Ruth spoke quickly, and she felt it would be a mean thing to do. She felt, too, that she was doing wrong to suppose for a moment that Leland could have had any part in any mishap that might have come to Philemon Bond, but the evidence was such that she did not feel courage to boldly declare to Arad that all of his theories were wild and unjust.

His eyes twinkled with satisfaction, but he concealed the betraying signs quickly, and went on:

"Thar ain't no need o' harrowin' up Sherwin's feelin' over it, nohow. All I hev ter do is ter go out an' bury the feller, an' Leland will be as safe as you please. You an' me will be the only ones that'll know of it, an' the secret will be safe in our hands."

His reiterations were all to one effect, and Ruth moved uneasily. She wished to disclaim

all interpretations of the situation such as Arad was putting upon it, but she was not used to such work, and did not understand how to go about it.

Arad rose.

"I'll go right away," he observed. "You kin rest assured that I'll put the betraying signs out o' the way, an' that right quick. Don't let any one know why I come here; not even my mother. Good-day!"

He went out quickly—so quickly that Ruth had only barely time to realize he was going before he was gone.

"Why didn't I keep him longer?"

She asked the question mechanically, after going to the window and looking after the receding miner, yet she could not have told why she wanted to see him further. She had a notion she ought to do something to assert that whatever had come to Philemon Bond, her brother did not have any part in it; but she did not see her way clear to offer anything in the way of proof.

"No, no; it is better I should wait and think," she finally decided. "Think? I must think! I must see clearly; I must do something—I know not what. I feel like one beset with nightmare. I am frightened as I never was before. It is horrible, horrible!"

She leaned her hot forehead against the window-glass and tried to calm herself.

"I am all in confusion, but I know Leland has done nothing wrong."

It was the blind faith of her sex, or what passes for such. Really, if she had believed what she asserted, she would not have listened to Arad Huse. In point of fact, the evidence had stunned her. She tried to believe her brother was innocent, but she could not understand how such evidence could be in existence against him if he had had no share in Bond's death.

The presence of his knife—

Ah! the knife! Where was it?

She looked around quickly, and arrived at a conclusion.

"Arad has taken it away with him! Why did he do that?"

There was alarm in her mind as she asked the question. What could Huse want of the knife?

CHAPTER XII.

GABE GROWS OBNOXIOUS.

DREAMER DICK had transfixed a bug on a pin and was examining it carefully. Richard had a tender heart, and would not, from any trivial reason deprive any creature of its life or liberty, but as a disciple of science he had to take some privileges with his own feelings, and the feelings of others. The bug was only a victim to science.

Gabe Gall came to the youth's side.

"What are you up to, now?" asked the man from Great Hump.

"Can you tell me, gentle sir, what species this is?" Dick inquired.

"At a rough guess I should say it was a measly bug, but further than that deponent sayeth not. Boy, suppose some one should stick you on a pin?"

"It would be all right, if done in the interest of science, sir," returned Dick, with enthusiasm.

"Perhaps I will transfix you some day. It would be amusing to see you squirm. You are a great investigator, Richard."

"I am a slave to my profession, sir!" asserted the boy, his face glowing with zeal.

"Do you prefer bugs or men?"

"Men?"

"You know you investigated Philemon Bond somewhat."

Dick regarded the Gambolier in silence for some time.

"You are wrong," he then answered. "Men are not in my line."

"Do you forget the sounds you heard in Bond's room, and the disappearance which followed?"

"I know not what you are talking about," placidly returned Richard.

"Have you forgot that a voice told you: 'Go to bed, fool?' Can you forget such historic words?"

"Many men have a habit of calling me fool. I heed not such things. I dare say they are right, and if they are it would be ill manners in me to contradict them."

"Ingenious Richard, let us not evade the subject. Let us talk it over seriously. You and I are friends to the household here, are we not?"

"It's a wise man who knows his own friends. Few do know them except fools."

Dick's steady placidity annoyed Gabe more than he was willing to confess. It seemed absurd, yet he was finding the youth the most difficult person to deal with whom he had met.

"Richard, you and I have leisure which others have not. Can't we do some good while we wait?"

"What?"

"This matter about Bond may cause trouble when it gets to the ears of the outside world. What is to hinder you and me from making an effort, now, and clearing the path so that there will be no trouble for our friends here when the

whole matter is sifted, as it is sure to be before many days?"

"What do you suggest?" asked Dick, straightening out the legs of the bug.

"Let us form ourselves into a tribunal of two and investigate. If you have any taste for mystery—"

"Mystery!" cried Dick, his pale face flushing. "Why, it is better than food and drink! It is grand. Do you know of any mystery?"

"Isn't there one concerning Bond?"

"Is there?" inquired Dick, innocently.

Cool and patient Gabe Gall felt like tearing his hair. The fool of the Huse family was aggravating to an extreme.

"You know what you heard in his room?"

"What did I hear?"

"A struggle; a cry, I think; a disturbance which made you go to the door, only to be told peremptorily to go to bed."

"How do you know I heard all this?"

"Like you, I may be a wise fool. Anyhow, I know it. Now, if you give me your version—"

"If you are a wise fool you don't need it, and if you're a stupid fool, you ought not to try it on. Don't let ideas get into your head! They are bothersome. When I get an idea it just simply goes round and round until I think there is a saw-mill running in my head. Better let ideas alone. I do, and all fools ought to!"

Gabe could have taken Richard and flogged him with good relish, then and there. The quiet unconcern of the youth was simply exasperating in the extreme.

Yet, the Gambolier's patience was not all acquired, and he braced up for fresh effort and began the catechism anew. He seemed to have set his heart on making him talk. If he had he was signally routed. Not once betraying suspicion, hesitation or resentment, Dick baffled the questioner at every turn, and when Gabe brought him down to the direct inquiry of whether he had heard what he, Gabe, claimed to have been told elsewhere, it was impossible to corner him or make him admit or deny anything.

In his own peculiar way Dick said a good deal without saying anything, as it were.

The Gambolier finally had to let the interview end.

"Beaten!" he admitted, as he went away. "If all wise persons were as sharp as this fool, I might as well pack my grip and go whence I came. Luckily, there are but few fools like Dick in the world."

It was an hour when trade was dull, yet Gabe had the impression he would find Leland Sherwin in his office. In this he was not disappointed. Leland was there, and alone. Mr. Gall entered like a sunbeam, as far as his smile was concerned.

"Hallo!" was his genial greeting; "how are you, old man? Having a sociable all to yourself?"

"I am alone, as you can see," Sherwin coldly answered.

"Yes; and we can have a good talk. Hand me a cigar!"

Gabe sat down and elevated his heels to the top of the desk. Not having the cigar passed to him, he helped himself without the least appearance of concern.

He began to smoke with a show of happiness, while Leland watched him closely. Finally the latter said:

"Mr. Gall, I wish to speak with you!"

The visitor did not heed the serious manner of the speech, but readily responded:

"Fire ahead!"

"You have been my guest," began Leland, his voice wavering a trifle.

"Yes," Gabe agreed, "and I must say I like my quarters. Only one thing is lacking. I need an awning put up to my window, and though such things are rather fly for this town, I have ordered one and told them to charge it to you."

Sherwin's face flushed a trifle, but he did not comment upon the statement. More seriously than ever, he went on:

"I regret to say, Mr. Gall, that our arrangements will make it necessary for me to do without your company from this time. I am going to make certain changes which compel me to practically close up my house for the present."

"Oh! that'll be all right. I will still sleep there, and you can get me feeding quarters at the hotel. I haven't any money, but you can advance what I need, and I'll pay you when I get the stuff."

"Why should I pay your bills?" demanded Leland, with some warmth.

"Because," explained Gabe, with his most genial smile, "I can't pay them myself."

"Am I your banker?"

"You seem to be," frankly confessed Mr. Gall. "Of course I'll make it all right, later on, for I am too proud to accept favors from any one, but jest now I am dead broke. It's a bad thing for a proud man, I do declare!"

The Gambolier did not feel so bad but that he laughed as he said it. Sherwin held to the subject.

"You came here a stranger. I think I have done my duty to you, and now I cannot do anything more. Much as I may regret it, I shall have to decline to help you further, unless it will

be a favor for me to buy you a ticket to some other town. I will pay your way to any point in this State you may wish to go to."

"Egad! Lele, you're a mighty fine fellow. I would jump at the chance under other circumstances, but my health will not permit of it, now. I must have absolute quiet."

"You have not referred to your health being poor, before."

"I didn't want to worry you. Yes; my health is wretched; simply wretched. Only absolute rest can save me from a collapse. I don't know just what is the trouble with me, but I find by reading a patent-medicine advertisement that I have the symptoms of twenty-seven different complaints, all fatal unless I have rest and take that very medicine!"

"Mr. Gall, this is not a joking matter!"

"Joking matter! Well, I should say it isn't! When a man is down on an *ad.* for twenty-seven fatal complaints, he feels that jokes will fit his case about as well as colic in a sitting hen!"

The Gambolier's smile was unceasing, and Leland, who had made up his mind to get rid of him at all hazards, became too angry for diplomacy.

"You can take your troubles and yourself out of my house, sir!" he almost shouted. "I won't have you there any longer. Do you hear?"

"Oh! I heard," lightly returned Gabe, "but see here—how am I to look up Philemon Bond if I tear myself away?"

Leland set his fingers in a painful grip.

"What have you to do with Bond?" he demanded.

"I want to clear up the mystery of his disappearance. He has gone out of sight like a dew-drop in the morning, and it would be interesting to know why he went."

"What have you to do with him?" asked Leland, almost inaudibly.

"Oh! I'm of an inquiring turn of mind."

"Confess that you came to Shadow Shaft to look him up!"

"Why should I?"

"You ought to know."

In this sparring match the manner of the men was very dissimilar. Leland was plainly nervous, while Gabe did not cease to use his beaming smile. The latter was a wonder in his way, and it was not hard to see that his way must be bitter, indeed, to one opposed to him. Better insult, loud bullying or threats than that smile which was so deceptive.

"That's what occurred to me," remarked Mr. Gall, easily, referring to Leland's last remark. "I was wondering if I had forgotten anything. Am I what I think, or am I some other fellow?"

Sherwin tried to rally and remain cool.

"When can you leave Shadow Shaft?" he asked.

"When I've found your friend Bond."

Leland felt that he was facing the truth at last. He could order Gabe out of his house, but by doing so he would only precipitate the ruin which threatened him. He leaned his head upon his hand and wished himself dead. What did life have for him that was worth living when this fellow had him by the throat?

"Can't you arrange to accommodate me?" asked Gabe, mildly, after a pause; and at sound of his voice Sherwin nervously rose.

"Remain!" he replied. "I insist upon nothing. Remain, and when your work is done, use as little mercy as pleases you. Spare no one!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SILK GLOVE AND THE IRON GRIP.

SHERWIN passed out of the office with steps far from being as firm and dignified as usual.

"It has come!" he thought. "There can no longer be any doubt as to his purpose. He is here to investigate the whole affair, and the worst is to be expected. Why didn't I accept the poor mercy of Philemon Bond? At the most, he could only have ruined me. This man will do more!"

While Gabe Gall, evidently under mask at all times, audibly observed:

"Wonder what ails Lele? He don't act like himself. I must keep close watch of him, for he may need it. Yes; he may need watching!"

Gabriel took another cigar from Sherwin's box and lighted it with a show of great pleasure. He was still sitting there, with his feet on the desk, when Major Ward Fearing came in, a few moments later. The major stopped short and stared in surprise. Gambolier's assurance angered him more than ever.

"Hallo, old man!" was Gabe's genial salutation.

"Have you seen Sherwin?" Fearing demanded, sharply.

"Not lately."

"He wants to see you!"

"What for?"

"To order you out of town!" hotly declared Fearing.

Gabe smiled lazily.

"Why don't you do that?"

"I will! The matter was left to Leland, but you go too far with your infernal impudence. We've had enough of you, and you can skip. I distinctly remember that Sherwin was

to do this job in a diplomatic way, but I am not built in that style; I've got to speak frankly. You have come here and forced yourself upon us without regard to reason or decency. Even now you are making yourself as much at home here as if you owned the place. There's a limit to effrontery, sir, and you have reached it. The sooner you get out of town, the better it will be for you. Do you hear?"

"I have succeeded in catching most of what you said," returned the Gambolier, smilingly. "Yet, I am not going to tear myself away, at present."

"Do you defy us?"

"Eh?"

"We order you to go!"

"Then I'm literally turned out of town?"

"That's it."

"Maje, sit down," requested Gabe, easily.

"You remind me of a story. I'll tell it—"

"I want none of your stories, sir!"

"Better hear it, maje; it's of interest."

Fearing regarded the smiling man from Great Hump with some concern. He had yielded to sudden anger when he so boldly ordered Gabe away, and now he had been given time to meditate on his own recklessness he began to feel uneasy. He said nothing, and Mr. Gall slowly drawled:

"This is a fable, and you may have heard it. There were once two wolves who were hired by a farmer to go over his fields and pick up and save for him all the locks of wool torn from the fleeces of the sheep as they passed by bushes which would catch and rend their garments."

"Once in so often the farmer sent his faithful dog to get the wool thus saved and bring it to him. Now, these wolves were not of the most honest turn of mind, and it occurred to them that if they could kill the faithful dog when he came, they would have a chance to take the wool away and sell it for their own gain."

"The dog came and was taken unaware and slain, so the wolves really did get the wool and fill up their pockets."

"Now when the dog did not reappear the farmer sent to the wolves to know what had become of him. The wolves— What do you suppose the wolves did?"

Gabe broke off on his story abruptly. It never was finished, but if the wolves looked as badly broken up as Major Fearing did, they must have betrayed their guilty secret at once.

Fearing and his partner, tired of waiting for Gabe to show whether he was dangerous or not, had resolved to end the suspense by boldly ordering Gabe away, thinking this would make him show whether he was a spy or not.

Fearing did not want more light, then. He believed he saw the supposed wolves in himself and Leland, and the faithful dog in Philemon Bond, and his zeal to experiment died away.

To the last question he feebly replied:

"I don't know."

"I was in hopes you did," drawled Gabe, "for I have forgotten the rest of the story, myself. It's too bad, but we may find some one who can finish the narrative. I should say, however, that it would not be wise for the wolves to be too flippant!"

Ward Fearing thought he saw what the story meant. He sunk into a chair in a limp fashion.

"To return to the matter you spoke of," serenely resumed the Gambolier. "I am not in love with the idea of leaving Shadow Shaft. I am an amateur astronomer, and I came here to take observations of Venus, Mars and Jupiter. Would you advise me to go away, or stop and finish my work?"

"Perhaps you had better stay!"

It was no cordial invitation, for Fearing looked as if he had a sudden attack of illness, but Gabe was not to be dampened in his purpose. Calmly he replied:

"Just my idea. It is a great time to observe the planets, and I don't want to miss anything—What! going, maje?"

"I am!"

The banker stalked out of the office without ceremony. Straight to Leland Sherwin's house he went. He found his partner alone.

"I've just come from the office," he announced.

"Gall is there."

"I know; I saw him," drearily answered Leland.

"You did? Did you refer to our business?"

"Yes."

"And I did the same thing. I was a fool. I did not forget you were to manage it, but when I went in the scoundrel was making free with the whole place, and my anger got the best of me. I went for him red-hot!"

"And he?"

"Saw my biggest stake and went me one better! Sherwin, that fellow is a spy upon us!"

"Did he confess it?"

"No; but it's as clear as day. He said enough so that I could not but see what he was. He has us by the throat. Cursed fool that I was! why couldn't I keep my mouth shut?"

"Tell me just what he said."

It might have pleased Gabe Gall could he have seen the partners, then. He had been ordered out of the town by them in a most uncivil way, yet, now, both were discussing him

with such a show of fear that it was plain he had won a most decisive victory.

Their present gravity was the best of proof they would not seek to intimidate him again.

Carefully they compared notes, and both were of one opinion.

"He is a detective sent to spy upon us, or else he's a meddlesome fellow who has got possession of our secret in some way," Fearing said.

"And he's equally dangerous, in either case. Man, why didn't we confess to Philemon Bond, as soon as he struck town?"

"Because we should have gone to the dogs all the sooner."

"What does a short reprieve signify? Gall will hunt us down. I suppose we will get our necks stretched, yet!"

"Hush!" cautioned Fearing, looking around nervously. "Don't make any such talk here. Now we are face to face with the danger. What can we do about it?"

"I know of nothing. We must wait."

"Wait for Gall to ruin us?"

"That's about it."

"Can't we buy him up? As I figure it, he is a most unscrupulous scoundrel, and money is probably his god. Why not try it?"

"And have some one else sent here in his place?"

"I do not think any one would be, if he reports there is no trail, here," thoughtfully replied Fearing. "The matter ought to drop if we can buy Gall up and get a favorable report sent abroad."

"What a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" quoted Leland.

"We've got to keep the web in motion. It is do or die, now. What do you say?"

"Let us think of it a bit before acting," suggested Sherwin. "I am ready to do what I can, of course, but we have made one error, to-day, by rashness. This should not be repeated. We must take time to think, and act with judgment when we do move again. Of course Gall remains here—he has an iron grip."

"We are as helpless as children in his hold."

"In the past," added Leland, bitterly, "our seemingly-prosperous business has led people to sometimes refer to us as the kings of Shadow Shaft. Who is king, now?"

"Gabe Gall, and no one else!"

The partners looked at each other in moody silence. They could see no light; no hope in the future. The blithesome Gambolier from Great Hump was truly king of the camp.

Leland finally broke the silence.

"When I think of what I am dragging Ruth to I get desperate!" he said. "She deserves better luck than this; she's too good a girl to have her life stained with my crimes."

He raised his eyes and, looking out of the window, saw Zylpha Mayne riding past. She did not once look toward the office, as far as was to be seen, yet he resented her presence in town.

"Every one is bent on ruining me!" he complained.

"There's only one way for us to do, and that is to fight!" declared Fearing. "Confound the whole lot of them! we're not yet done up! Fight? Yes; we'll battle to the end, and if they get the bulge on us it will only be after a hard fight. But, Sherwin, if we only could have had that ten thousand when we needed it!"

Zylpha was receding. What was the truth about her? Sherwin could not help thinking of the money, then. If she was sincere— But it was absurd to suppose she was.

Fearing soon went his way, but Leland remained by the window and gazed out without much sense of what was spread before his eyes. Despite this, he chanced to see something of interest. He saw Zylpha reach the limit of the town. There, some one accosted her.

"Gabe Gall!" the banker exclaimed. "It is not surprising. Very likely he brought her here and they are working to one end. Birds of a feather flock together, and buzzards scent the prey afar off. It is a combination to drag me down; a double lie in which they think they can play their part and I never suspect the truth. Thank Heaven! I am not blind if I am beset by foes. Oh! Miss Mayne, you are not so shrewd as you think you are!"

And he glowered fiercely at the pair on the trail.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE KING AND THE FOOL MEET.

"THE bug-hunter is at it again!"

The exclamation came from Gabe Gall, and there was a good deal of contempt in it. He was wandering among the hills, and had chanced to observe Dreamer Dick similarly engaged.

The youth appeared to be in a mood befitting his sobriquet; he did not seem conscious of anything except the business he had in view, and that was to find specimens—so Gabe inferred.

The Gambolier pulled at his mustache thoughtfully.

"It's odd," he added, "but if I were to have any one obstacle to my success removed by special act, I should name this same Dick Huse. Others I can manage without turning a hair, but I confess Richard baffles me. I should be ready to believe he is not the fool he is represented—

but it would be absurd to think otherwise, I suppose. Those who have known him long ought to know him well. What's the wise idiot doing now?"

Dreamer Dick had paused and was gazing around as if trying to see, or not to see, some one.

"He takes on a secret air. He appears to wish to escape notice. Why? There's nothing illegal about hunting bugs."

There was sarcasm, as well as conceit in Gabe's manner and comment. He was not indifferent to Dick's success in baffling him in the past.

The youth looked all around, and evidently satisfied himself on the point at issue. Then he turned and disappeared in a hole among the rocks.

"The animal seeks his den!" quoth Gabe. "Does he expect bug or measly plant, there? Why should he be afraid of being noticed?"

The question suggested so much to the Gambolier that he prepared to watch and see what would follow. He did not wholly trust this peculiar fool, and would not be surprised to see him do anything whatever.

Richard was not long out of sight. He reappeared, holding a bundle under his arm.

Once more he looked around sharply; then he started away at a brisk pace. Gabe whistled softly.

"If that's a bug it's a big one. I believe it may not be lost time to see what Mr. Dick Huse has in his mind. Here's for a try!"

He started, and managed to follow without attracting attention, if he read the signs aright. The pursuit was not long. After going a hundred rods Dick paused again. He lay down the bundle and laboriously lifted a large, flat stone. Into some sort of a cavity thus revealed he dropped the bundle; then over it he dropped the flat stone.

"A neat interment!" muttered Gabe, musingly. "Will the dead rise?"

Richard was in a meditative mood. His face was very serious, and he plainly had something on his mind. He stood up, and for the next ten minutes devoted himself to the task of scanning the surrounding country.

Long and earnestly he looked, but Gabe lay low, and there was nothing to be seen.

"Does our wise fool always use such caution in hiding his bugs and plants?" wondered the Gambolier. "Why is he so crafty now? He must have a motive."

Evidently satisfied, at last, that he had no observer close at hand, Dick took further measures to see how far the appearance of security was real. He made a circuit of the vicinity, and wound up by going back to the place of burial and looking at the stone as if he was afraid it had moved of its own accord.

It was not hard to avoid his notice, and Gabe allowed him all the time and opportunity he desired, yet the watcher had determined that he would see the buried thing if he had to remain there all night to do it.

At last Dreamer Dick parted from his surroundings with as much reluctance, it seemed, as if he had placed all his earthly treasure there, and moved away toward the town.

"Is he gone?" wondered Gabe. "If it were any one else—anybody but a fool, and this particular fool at that—I would make haste to see the cache. As it is, I don't trust him for a cent. He might come back and catch me at it."

Thinking thus, the Gambolier was very cautious, but as time passed and he saw no signs of the bug-hunter, he emerged from his hiding-place and went to the flat stone.

Lifting it up, he next raised the bundle. Its outer covering was only a dirty brown paper. He tore it off quickly.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed.

He held a coat in his hands; one nearly new, it seemed.

"Big enough to wrap Dick up in and have two-thirds of the cloth left over!" muttered Gabe. "Now, then, what the Dickens does he mean by all this? Buried coats are of use to no one. Richard, I grant you are a growing mystery!"

Wondering more than ever the more he looked at the garment, he began to search the pockets. All at once his hand slipped through an opening of different character, and discoveries followed.

The coat was divided at the breast by a clean gash from a knife. It was a rent neither long nor sweeping, but was very suggestive to him.

"Zounds!" he exclaimed; "if anybody was in this when the blow was dealt I wouldn't give much for his heart after the knife had done its work. The two would just about connect."

The Gambolier found ample food for thought. He sat down and, holding the coat, meditated.

Philemon Bond is missing. According to what I wormed out of servant John Brown, Dick claimed he heard singular things in Bond's room the night the latter went off the scene so strangely. Now, Dick is discovered monkeying with this garment, and evidently afraid of being seen, and the coat has this gash in the breast. Does it mean anything?"

Gabriel Gall was no longer the idle, careless, vagabondish man he seemed to be to many. With his brows bent in a thoughtful frown he appeared another, keener person.

Well might Sherwin and Fearing dread the results of what he might learn against them!

Suddenly arousing, as he remembered that Dick might return and catch him there, Gabe replaced the stone and took the coat some distance away. There he examined it anew.

"Just about the size I should suppose Bond would wear, judging from what I have heard. But was it the same garment he wore? Wonder if I can take it to the house and pump John Brown, without having him suspect he is being pumped? He told me all about what Dick overheard the night of Bond's downfall. I reckon I can pump him again with equal success. I'll try it!"

The Gambolier wrapped the coat up carefully and then began the difficult task of getting back to Sherwin's without having any one get at the facts in the case.

"That Richard is a corker!" Gabe admitted, freely. "I never want another fool to deal with; that kind of cattle are too sharp by far. Give me a full-witted person and I can beat him every time, but I am not in it with a fool. Now, what is the meaning of all this? Size Dick up as I may, I can't believe he is doing this act from any trivial motive. He may hunt bugs, but hide a coat for a reason merely childish? Never! He had a motive in it. What motive? The coat is gashed by a knife. Does he know how it came about? Or what became of Bond?—if this is his garment."

The mystery was too deep to be solved off-hand, and Gabe had to let it rest as it was.

Nearing the town he became more wary. He wanted no one to see the coat for the time being.

"It might do no harm unless Dick got onto the game, but he would be liable to blow on me if he got a suspicion. I must look out for the fellow!"

Using great care he gained the house, and, he thought, gained it unseen by anybody.

He took the coat to his own room and locked it up in one of the bureau drawers. There it appeared to be safe.

"I will soon have something tangible," he thought. "John Brown always acted as hostler for Philemon Bond, and he will know at first sight whether the agent wore this thing. Aha! Richard-the-Third Huse, I imagine I have you on the hip!"

It did Gabe a good deal of good to think so, and he spent the next few hours in anticipating his triumph. John Brown was busy, but the Gambolier was content to wait until they were in the room, as usual, in the later part of the evening.

Gabe went out for a walk and enjoyed the air exceedingly. One does feel more at peace with the world when he is about to gain a grand victory.

At supper there was no trace of trouble. Leland refrained from any inquiring glance toward his enemy, and Gabe had never been in better humor. He told stories and indulged in a good deal of nonsense, as usual. He was really happy. He had only to pick the ripe plums.

Once, he was near enough to the kitchen so that, looking in, he saw Dreamer Dick labeling some botanical specimens he had gathered in the hills.

"Go on!" Mr. Gall murmured, to himself. "Be happy now; you will weep, later on!"

Gabriel saw fit to retire early, and he took John Brown to the chamber as usual. After some skirmishing he came to the point.

"You were valet for Mr. Bond, I believe, John."

"I had that consequential honor, sah," returned the black man, with dignity.

"I suppose he was a great dresser?"

"Pretty tolerable."

"Arrayed like Solomon in all his glory, eh?"

"I never knew Solomon, sah."

"No? Well, it don't matter. Have you a good memory?"

"None better."

"Would you remember, a year hence, what I wear now?"

"Yes, sah; the minutinmost details of your apparel. I have an eye for particularation."

"I'll test you."

Gabe rose, went to the drawer and turned the key.

"I want you to decide on a certain matter, and do it with judgment. No 'snap' judgment, though, John Brown; remember that. Make sure before you speak, and then get right down to bed-rock. See?"

"I observe."

"Good! Here's the—"

Gabe had pulled the drawer out. He reached down confidently for the coat, but did not take it out. On the contrary, he stood dumfounded. The coat was not there!

The drawer was empty.

CHAPTER XV.

CHECK TO THE KING.

GABE GALL was not his airy self, then.

He stood with a blank face and stared at the empty drawer as if he were an actor confronting Banquo's ghost.

"What's the object you wish to show me, sah?" asked John Brown.

Gabe slowly straightened up.

"Have you been in this room?" he demanded, in a low voice.

"Not since last night, sah."

"Who has?"

"Don't know, sah; ain't seen nobody but you."

Where now were the merry jests of happy-go-lucky Gabriel? Somehow, his good humor appeared to have died away, and in its place was only a somber face, and a crestfallen air.

Gone! The coat he had so carefully locked up was nowhere to be seen. Absurd as the trial was, he made the circuit of the place, and assured himself it had not been mixed with his own few garments. Then he had to face the facts; he had been signally defeated.

"Anything wrong?" asked John Brown, seriously.

Gabe felt like licking himself across the room. Why had he not held to the coat when he had it? But it was too late to seek wisdom. The question was now, who had robbed him, and why had it been done?

In the hall rose a clear, masculine voice in song, but a voice so delicate of volume that it might almost have been mistaken for that of a woman.

The song was a plaintive little air; the singer— Gabe's face turned red.

The singer was Dreamer Dick!

At that moment the Gambolier would almost have staked his life on one opinion, and that was, that Dick was the robber. The song and the singer receded. Gabe listened, spellbound, until all was quiet again, then suddenly aroused.

"I have changed my mind," he remarked.

"I'll postpone what I had to say, and see you at some future time. It was only a trivial matter. On the whole, you need not stay to help me to bed. The hour is early, and I may yet see fit to go down and see Sherwin. For the present, good-night, John."

The colored man was too well bred to express surprise, so he accepted the decision calmly and went out.

Left alone, Gabe Gall threw off all restraint.

"Baffled!" he exclaimed, without any intention of acting the tragic. "Baffled, and robbed of the evidence which was worth more than money or friends! Baffled, and by Dreamer Dick!"

Not for a moment did he doubt the correctness of his verdict. Who should rob him but the bug-hunter? Who else could have any clew to his own game?

"Providence protect me from ever again meeting with a fool!" added the Gambolier, beginning to rally a little. "Folks of sound mind may be beaten, for they have only human wisdom, but a fool—a fool like Dick—why, I'm simply not in it!"

There was a degree of exasperation in the matter which was beyond expression. He thought he had been very shrewd in conveying the coat from its hiding-place to the house, but he now felt sure he had all the time been under Dick's watch, and that he had been beaten as easily as if he had given all the chance in the world.

The song in the hall was rankling in his mind, and he determined to see more of the boy who had worsted him so signally. He went to the kitchen and found Dick there, intently engaged in arranging an assortment of bugs, plants and other choice specimens in due order. He looked up as Gabe came in, but with a far-away expression on his face, as if his mind soared to higher things.

The Gambolier stopped short.

"Well?" he began, meaningly.

Richard smiled a gentle smile.

"I am at a loss to know what to call this bug," he remarked. "It is very odd, and out of the range of things known to me."

"I think I can suggest the name," grimly replied Gabe.

"Can you?" cried Dick, delighted. "What is it?"

"Call it 'fool!'"

Richard appeared surprised.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you can't fathom it! Because it is an unnatural thing. Because it is a sly, secret, cunning, lying thing to look at!"

"Dear me!" quoth the boy, in gentle wonder, "I don't see the idea. Besides, I want the right name."

"Boy, when did you get your latest specimen?"

"To-night."

"I thought so! What was it?"

"A curious, flying object; the name I don't know."

"Show it to me!"

"With pleasure," and Dick lifted a homely bug.

"Did you get it in my room?"

"Oh, no; it was flying."

Gabe felt an almost overpowering desire to take the boy by the neck and administer prompt and severe punishment. Dick's simplicity, his composure and his air of innocence were simply exasperating to the baffled investigator. A ten-year-old child might talk as Dick did, but no

one else had that privilege, the Gambolier thought.

Yet, it would not do to use him with violence. "Why did you go to my room?" sharply demanded Gabe.

"When?"

"This evening."

"I have not been there," and Richard looked into his questioner's eyes as mildly and quietly as if he and innocence were one.

"Sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I have no more to say."

The Gambolier had said more than he intended, already, but he had lost his temper. Master of the situation at all other times, he was beaten, irritated and nonplused by this youth—by the fool of the camp. It was more than he could bear.

"Did you think you saw me there, sir?" asked Dick.

"Boy, attend to your bugs and beetles. 'Tis an occupation just fitted to your colossal mind. Of course you are never seen as a fisher of men. Open, frank and honest of nature, you are in good company with your pets. Go not among men, for they are full of duplicity, and you are free from guile. Stick to your bugs!"

Having wrought himself up to a pitch of indignation, Gabe turned on his heel and stalked back to his own room.

"Up against a snag!" he commented. "I can't say it was Dick who took the coat, but I think it was. In any case, I have lost valuable evidence. It may take me weeks to get the same amount of evidence. I may never get it, again."

"Confound this offspring of the Huse family! He is a thorn in my flesh. A fool? Zounds! if all were as foolish as he, common folks like me would have no show in this world!"

"The boy perplexes me. He acts just what he is represented to be—a youth not of strong mind. Yet, he, alone, baffles me. I would give my last present dollar to get that coat back. Dick is the thief. Can I play a trump card on him? Can I, by watching, find what I want and get it back?"

"I must try, for it is too valuable evidence to be lost. But how get it?"

The Gambolier bent his head upon his hand and meditated long and deeply. Despite his many rebuffs he felt capable of defeating Dick, but how to find an object the bug-hunter might ere then have buried far from human sight was not easily seen.

Gabe had no theory when he went to bed. He rose in the same fix, but had recovered his old manner and intended to make a strong fight.

Dick was not visible, and the Gambolier did not ask for him. After breakfast the latter did some thinking and ended by going over to the hotel. There he asked for Miss Zylpha Mayne, and was soon in her presence.

Leland Sherwin had judged but poorly when, seeing these two persons together, he had rushed to the conclusion they were partners in the campaign against him. They had met casually. Gabe had sought her acquaintance, and she had not rebuffed him. If, however, either had a selfish motive in the association, it had not appeared in their conversation, and no understanding had been arrived at between them.

Zylpha looked surprised at seeing Mr. Gall, but he lightly observed:

"I am dying of the blues. I trust you won't repulse me for coming to you for the cure?"

"I see no reason why I should do that, but I am afraid you have sought a poor doctor for your trouble."

"All I ask is that you will talk to me. I need it. I'm a blasted pine, as somebody has poetically remarked; and though you are not compelled to make a martyr of yourself for me, I hope you will!"

Gabe was in his old mood, so the lugubrious complaint went for but little. He was in her presence, however, and he proceeded to get around to business. This he did in his usual wary style, and it was a good deal later when he came to the subject nearest his heart.

"Have you been bug-hunting, lately?" he inquired. "I don't refer to house-bugs, but those captured by your friend, Dreamer Dick."

"Beyond my sympathy I have given no help in that line."

"Dick is a fine fellow."

"Yes."

"I suppose you and he are quite confidential?"

"You are laughing at me, now?"

"Not at all. I only know you have humored him in his fancy for science, and thereby won his heart."

"I think he does appreciate what I do."

"Any one would," remarked Gabe, with an attempt at diplomacy, which was soon shown to be anything but well considered.

"Save your flattery!" Zylpha requested, not very amiably.

"Excuse me," answered Mr. Gall, quick to take a hint; "I am not so foolish as you infer, but I accept your rebuke readily. It is odd how Dick takes to science."

"Yes."

"I am quite fond of him, though he has irritated me once or twice, and caused me to show

unpraiseworthy temper, I fear. He does not confide in me much. Do you think you could warm him out?"

Gabe was light and airy, but he was dealing with one whose wits had been sharpened by adversity. Zylpha saw that he had some object in his gradual approach, and she grew suspicious accordingly. He resided in Leland Sherwin's house. She was not prepared to trust such a person implicitly.

"I might," she agreed, quietly.

"I think the boy one of unusual qualities. If we could get at his heart, we might find something of interest, and, at the same time, help him."

"What would you suggest?"

"That you so enlarge the grip you have on him that you can prevail upon him to be perfectly frank in all things."

"Can't you be more definite?" asked Zylpha, still quietly.

"No; only that you get at his secrets, tell me what they are, and let us compare notes for his good."

"What does this portend?" thought the girl.

CHAPTER XVI.

DICK MAKES AN OFFER.

ALoud, Zylpha quietly answered:

"I am, of course, glad to do what I can to help Dick. He is deserving of aid, and his lack of shrewdness makes him especially an object fit for our help."

"It's a great pity about his lack of shrewdness!" returned Gabe, grimly.

"It is, indeed."

"Well, see what you can do, and report the result to me. You and I are not long to be residents of this town, and we must hasten in our campaign in his behalf. Pay particular attention to him, and let me hear from you as soon as you have anything of interest to unfold. Get at his plans, interests, and so on."

The Gambolier was in a fever to make his meaning plainer, but he dared not do it. He could only hope something would come of what he had said already, and let it go at that.

There was not much more to be said, so he only tarried to try and increase his hold on Zylpha; then went away. When he had disappeared, the girl looked after him with an expression which, could he have seen it, would have awakened doubt in his mind that he had gained much of a hold, after all.

"So they are plotting against me!" she murmured. "Not content with doubting my word and humiliating me, Leland sends his agents here to entrap me. How? What pitfall yawns at my feet?"

She could not answer her own questions, but, with matters as they were between her and Leland, it was natural she should look upon a visit from one of his household as very suspicious and indicative of just what she had intuited.

"Help him?" she thought, looking after Gabe. "Help him with Dreamer Dick? What a transparent trick! Little does he care for the boy. It is all a scheme against me, though the attack is veiled. It will not succeed; I am not to be caught thus. No; and this encourages me to make a bold campaign against Leland. He has no mercy for me—why should I have any for him?"

Gabe went back to Sherwin's in an unsatisfied frame of mind. He hoped for the best, but was not by any means sure he had gained much by visiting Zylpha.

"She did not fall into my arms," he observed, with his usual extravagance of language, "and I did not see any indication that she wished to. Anyhow, she is not likely to do me any harm, and I will rest in the hope she may do me good."

Reaching the house the Gambolier proceeded to make himself at home. Seeing no one to entertain him, he took a book and lay down on the piazza. He was as careless as ever in manner, and appeared to be bound up in the book, but though he turned the leaves at regular intervals, he really did not know what was on the pages.

He was thus occupied when Dorcas Huse came out and paused near him. Now, Dorcas had sons who were not classed among the good citizens of Shadow Shaft, but she bore a reputation free from clouds, and one of her traits was that she never put herself forward unduly. When she met one of the family she always went her way quietly unless spoken to by the other person.

Knowing this, Gabe was somewhat surprised when she stopped.

"Fine day, my good soul!" he remarked.

"Yes," Dorcas admitted.

"Is business rushing with you?"

"Woman's work is never done," was the very original response. "I have not seen you in the kitchen, lately."

"I have been just overrun with business, myself. My profession requires constant attention to things."

"Even if I have not seen you, I think you have been there—in my kitchen."

"You do think so? Why?"

"Am I not right?"

"No. I have not been there unknown to you. Why did you think I had, my good soul?"

Dorcas regarded the Gambolier without speaking for some time.

"Much as I like that classic region," continued Gabe, "I should not be so foolish as to call when the chief attraction was away—meaning yourself."

The compliment was lost. Dorcas gazed first at him and then at vacancy, and did not seem satisfied with the situation of affairs. The Gambolier grew curious.

"What's up?" he directly demanded.

"Nothing."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Curiosity!"

With this reply Dorcas turned and went into the house, leaving Gabe in a bewildered frame of mind.

"Now, then, what ails her majesty?" he muttered. "She isn't a woman to say or do anything without a motive. She had one now, but what it was I can't guess. Somebody has been in her kitchen. Who, and what did he do? It is a sacred spot to her, and intrusion would be resented, but I did not suppose she would go on the war-path for a small reason. She wouldn't, either; she had some cause for her question. Well, it don't concern me, if she did put me down as the culprit. I have not made any raid on her premises. Let me think of more important matters."

At about the same time, Dreamer Dick made his appearance at the Huse shanty. Richard seldom went there. He was not a favorite with any of his brothers, or with Lute's wife, and as a result they were as anxious he should stay away as he was to avoid their company.

They never scrupled to make this fact known, but he had borne a good deal of abuse from them and never entered any complaint, when they chanced to meet him.

Amazon Moll was alone when he made his appearance on this occasion. She beheld him with strong dissatisfaction.

"Hallo, fool!" was her sisterly greeting.

"Hallo!" Dick placidly replied.

"What are you prowlin' around hyer fer?"

"I only dropped around to see you," quietly answered Richard.

"You can drop away as soon as you please."

"Am I doing any harm?"

"I've told you, time and again, there's no room for you in this cabin. When I married Lute Huse I didn't marry all his relatives!"

"Arad and Ab are here."

"Arad and Ab are not fools."

"No," meekly agreed Dick.

"Just you understand," proceeded the Amazon, "that if your old woman loses her grip at Sherwin's, you can't fall back on me! You ain't o' no earthly good, an' I won't hev you hyer. You'll hev ter root hog, or die. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Don't let the idea get out o' that fool head o' yours. I run a house fer sensible folks. See?"

"Yes."

"Don't stand there and say nothin' but 'Yes!' snapped the virago. "You've got a tongue, ain't you?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Nothin'; I want you ter keep still an' never open yer jaw. Yes; an' you've got ter do it. Hear? Now, what are you hyer fer?"

"To see my brothers."

"They ain't hyer, an' ef they was, they ain't got no use fer you. We all want you ter keep away from hyer, an' you've got ter do it. See?"

Moll seemed capable of going on forever, but at that moment Arad put in an appearance. It was no especial gain for Dick. Arad beheld his brother, and a frown overspread his face. Without a word of greeting, he hung up his rifle and sat down.

Richard gazed at him in silence. If he felt hurt at the exhibition of unbrotherly feeling, he did not give any evidence of it.

"I suppose you are all well," he finally observed, not asked.

"What's that to you?" snapped Amazon Moll.

"You'd better go back to Sherwin's," growled Arad. "That's the place fer you ef you feel above yer kin, ez you seem ter do. A good long time it's been sence you was hyer afore."

"But we're willin' he should stay away!" put in Moll, hastily.

"Certain, we be."

"I do very well at Sherwin's, and you seem to do very well here," mildly returned Dick.

Moll laughed harshly.

"It's rare you get a compliment from a fool, Arad!" she sneered.

"Oh, Dick is all right," answered Arad, more gently. "He ain't ter blame ef he has got a weak head. Some folks are weak in their arms, ye know. Humans run ter weaknesses. I'm glad ter say I ain't bad off in my arms nor head. Every family hez its member with a cog loose in his noddle. Et ain't Dick's fault he was born that way. Ef you be a fool, you gain by not hevin' ter work."

There was no great amount of encouragement in the elder brother's words, but Dick took them with the same lack of visible temper peculiar to

him. Nothing appeared to ruffle him, and the word "fool" had been flung at him until he was accustomed to it.

"I get along all all right," he placidly replied. Moll tossed her head disdainfully, but said nothing. It was Dick who broke the silence which followed.

"Those are nice boots you wear, Arad," he remarked.

The miner looked down at his feet. If the remark had come from any one but Dick he would have taken alarm at once, for he had not forgotten that he had obtained the boots by an act of violence, and that some one might see fit to investigate the death of the man on the trail, but Richard seemed too insignificant to be honored with suspicion.

"Them is boots!" declared the elder brother, with emphasis.

"How much do they cost?"

"More than you've got."

"I don't know; I have some money. I've saved up something, and I'd like a pair of boots just like those."

"Pretty sight you'd be in a decent pair o' boots!" scoffed Arad.

"I'll buy them."

"Will you? I guess not; they ain't fer sale."

"I'll pay you well."

"Go away!"

"Say what they cost, and you shall have more than that for them."

"Look here! What's eatin' you?"

Arad wheeled upon his brother in sudden suspicion. The boots were about as much like what Richard usually wore as they were like a lady's dancing slippers. What could this sudden fancy mean?

"I want to dress better," explained the boy, mildly. "Other folks wear nice things; why shouldn't I?"

Arad studied the gentle face and his suspicions died away. Was not this the family fool? He could have no hidden motive, and who would use him as a spy?

Danger from him? Bah! thought Arad.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE NIGHT RAID.

"NEVER mind those boots!" advised Arad. "I'm wearin' them, an' it's fit I should. Them is men's boots."

"They're pretty," agreed Dick, with childlike admiration. "I like them, and I'll give you more than you paid for them."

His persistency angered Amazon Moll.

"Say!" she exclaimed; "give the fool the boots, or hush him up about them; I've heard enough about the confounded old boots!"

"So have I," added Arad. "Dick, you had better go an' see ter your bugs; we don't want you here. See?"

"I am doing very well."

"You get out o' this house! We won't have no fool hyer. Go, an' never mind ef you forget ter come back!"

"You've heard it; now skip!"

Amazon Moll had been uneasy in Richard's presence, and she took advantage of Arad's ultimatum. As she spoke the words last recorded she advanced upon the youth with a club held aloft. What she would have done is uncertain, for Dick, accustomed to being ordered out of the house of his kindred, calmly rose.

"I will go and look for specimens," he tranquilly observed.

"You're the biggest bug I hev seen!" declared Moll, with what she believed to be wit.

Richard said nothing, but went out quietly. She watched him out of sight, and then turned to Arad.

"Your mother's fool knows less and less every day he lives!" she asserted viciously.

Huse looked down at his boots and meditated.

"Sometimes," he slowly replied, "I almost fancy Dick ain't so big a fool as he looks to be."

"Nonsense! What else is he?"

"Why did he keep talkin' about these boots? You know how I got them. Ef anybody has found out I throwed the feller off from the cliff—yes; an' did him up afore I throwed him—et would go hard with me. Ef they could get the boots et would be jest so much evidence. Why did Dick keep talkin' about the boots, I say?"

"Han'some things ketch the eyes o' fools. Lord! could you fancy there was harm in Dick Huse? Hal ha!"

The Amazon laughed harshly, and Arad was ashamed to repeat his insinuation that there might be harm in the boy, but he regarded the boots still further and could not forget what Richard had said.

Was he a spy for some one who had gained clew to the way Job Joy had been served on the trail?

Lute and Ab came in soon after.

"All ready fer biz?" asked the latter.

"I am," replied Arad.

"Me, too," added Lute.

"Then I s'pose we steal the gal ter-night?"

"We try."

Ab's eyes twinkled with satisfaction.

"Et will make things different, hyer!" he declared.

"Same old story!" grumbled Arad. "I tell ye, this fancy fer her will get us all inter trouble

ef it ain't held in. Thar ain't no good in a woman, nor in thinkin' o' one. You hear me?"

"Who went courtin' Ruth Sherwin, t'other day?" retorted Ab.

Arad winced.

"That's different."

"Yes; et's different, 'cause et was *you* who went!"

"Now, you men hush up!" advised Moll. "You ain't none o' you any good! I'm ter hev charge o' the beauty ef you get her hyer, an' you kin both jest bet that I won't hev no opposition ter my say-so. You hear me?"

They heard, and even Ab was too wise to dispute with her then. He did not abate one jot of his purpose, but he could afford to take his time.

The Cast-off Crew had work on hand for the night which was out of the ordinary course of events. They were about to do the boldest deed of their career in Shadow Shaft, in that it was to be done in the heart of the town. If discovered, it would be the end of their work in that vicinity, for the miners had a peculiar fashion of dealing with law-breakers.

"Et's got ter come," remarked Arad, musingly. "She ain't made no stir yet, but that don't mean she won't. Ef we hang off, we miss our only chance o' winnin' in the game ag'in' the gal."

"An' havin' her hyer!" murmured Ab to himself.

The brothers lay down early, and were soon asleep. They were so constituted that they had no nerves, and the shadow of coming events was a specter they had no knowledge of, as yet.

Amazon Moll remained awake, and at midnight she aroused them. They arose and set about preparing for the outer air. Each man carefully saw to his revolvers, and put a knife in his belt. Thus equipped, they left the house.

Below, the town was spread out in quiet sleep. Shadow Shaft had enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for its law-abiding tendencies, and no one ever saw saloons in full blast there, at an unseemly hour. Now, every one appeared to be resting but the Cast-off Crew.

Silently they went down the slope, with Arad at the head. Ab was in a suspenseful frame of mind, but he had learned not to trust his thoughts to his unsympathetic relatives. The others were actuated by motives purely of a business nature.

A slight detour enabled them to approach the center of the town with some degree of caution, but no one appeared to molest or challenge them. In a short time they were beside the hotel.

Custom rarely came to the Glory Gideon at a late hour, and the landlord made a practice of retiring early. Now, no light was to be seen.

All their plans had been arranged in advance, so there was no need of talk. Arad made a survey, and announced the result with a motion of his big hand. Then they went on in the work.

The building had a lower and an upper piazza, with stairs leading from one to the other. The prowlers ascended to the upper floor in silence.

Halting his aids, Arad went to a certain window and became a statue, as far as motion went. Long and carefully he listened; then he again motioned and the others came forward. He grasped the window and raised it gently. As he had expected, there was but little resistance, and the lower sash was soon up.

Ab was anxious for a prominent part, but Arad gave him no chance. The leader crept quietly in and stood in expectancy. He could hear some one breathing, and a grim smile overspread his face.

For awhile those without could not see him, but he soon reappeared.

A nod indicated that all was right, and Lute followed him in. Ab frowned and muttered:

"Let them go it, now, but ef *my* chance don't come, my name ain't what it is. The gal is mine, or I'll fight fer her!"

He stood where he was and listened. After a few moments he heard the sound of a slight struggle. He breathed quick and hard. It was only a matter of self-protection with his brothers, but was far more to him. What next?

Victory!

The marauders reappeared. They did not come alone. In their arms was a burden, and he knew well what it was.

Wrapped in a bed-spread, they bore Zylpha Mayne.

She no longer slept. She had been awakened by the rough usage, but might as well have slept as far as the power to help herself was concerned. Silently she was borne out on the piazza, and then down the steps to the lower floor.

It had been Ab's duty to watch and make sure no one was about. He had been too much interested to heed that duty, but did not confess it then. Really, it seemed nothing had been lost thereby, for no one was visible but their own party.

The capture had been successfully made, and the celerity with which they got out of the town was surprising. Swiftly threading the short streets, they were soon climbing the acclivity which led to the hut of the Cast-off Crew.

Ab was still out of the game except as an ob-

server, but he lived in hopes. Straight to the door of the hut and into the presence of Amazon Moll they went. There the burden was put down, and Zylpha sprung to her feet.

It was no reassuring sight upon which she gazed. The circle of brutal faces might have alarmed even one more accustomed to wild life.

She gazed at them in affright, and when she turned to Moll as the one hope she had, since Moll was the one woman, she was almost frozen, as it were, by the scornful and hostile glance she received. Moll was looking as only a low woman can look when she feels she is in the presence of one of her own sex as far superior to herself as the sun to a worldly light.

Arad spoke:

"Don't be afeerd, miss. Nobody is goin' ter hurt ye; jest keep quiet, an' it will all come out right. See?"

"What do you mean by bringing me here?" faltered Zylpha.

"We've done it fer yer own good, gal, so don't say a word. It'll be all right."

"Is it all right to take me from my home like this?"

"We had a motive—"

"Yes, we did!" broke in Amazon Moll, "an' don't ye make no more talk about it. This house is good enough fer me, an' ef it ain't fer you, you kin take what ye get. No heap talk, my lady!"

Ab pressed to the front, anxious to make a good impression.

"She's only jokin'," he hastened to say. "Don't ye mind her, fer she don't mean it. It's all right—"

Moll caught the speaker and, with one swing, sent him reeling away.

"Mebbe I don't mean it!" she shouted. "Wal, ef I don't, I come mighty near it, an' don't you forget it. I kin smash the man who gives me any lip!"

Arad was in a rage. His well-behaved relatives had promised to act with judgment, but had broken over at the first chance. His will was good enough to make them suffer for it, but he was shrewder than they. His face, only, told of his anger as he pushed every one aside.

"Miss," he observed, "I am master hyer, an' you have only ter heed me! These folks don't count. Don't you mind what they say. Harken only ter me! I tell ye you are all right; don't be scared."

"Why have you taken me here?" demanded Zylpha, tremulously.

"Et's fer your own good."

"How can it be?"

"I can't explain, now."

"I must decline to accept your judgment!" declared Zylpha, with sudden spirit. "This is a matter which ought to concern me, only. I demand that you let me go back whence I came!"

"Can't do it, miss."

"How dare you steal me away from my home?"

"You shall know all about it in time. Jest you keep still, now, an' take my word for it."

Ab was not satisfied to let the chance slip to appear to Zylpha as her best friend and defender. Once more he came to the front.

"Miss," he urged, "don't you think any harm kin come ter you while I am around. I'll stand by you through thick an' thin. I am yer frien', whether others be or not, an' you sha'n't suffer nothin' bad. I'll watch over you; I'll be near at all times; I'll be yer defender an' champion; I'll save ye from injury, or them who might harm ye shall walk over my dead body ter do it. You are safe while I'm—"

Abner was waxing eloquent, despite the fact that Lute was pulling at his coat-tail in an effort to shut him off quietly, but Arad had heard enough.

He motioned to Amazon Moll, causing her to open the door of the spare room, and he then shoved Zylpha unceremoniously through and shut Ab out in the midst of his oration.

Considerable trouble had been taken to make a place at once strong and comfortable for the prisoner. The comfort might not have been considered but for Ab; the strength was not for a moment forgotten.

Here, with the restrictions they intended to add, it seemed that Zylpha would be a helpless prisoner.

Something of this dawned upon her as she looked at the room. She was unnerved utterly. She did not know the gang, but one look at their faces was enough to fix their moral status in her mind.

She felt she was as safe as if with wolves—no more.

Who was there to save her from her fate?

And that fate—what was it?

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DEAD MAN.

GABE GALL sat on a rock a mile or more from Shadow Shaft. He was there simply because he had nothing of importance to attend to, and had wandered away to kill time.

Sitting there, he finally saw some one else coming along the rough ground between him and Shadow Shaft. He did not recognize the other traveler.

Nearer came the person, and Gabe saw it was

no stranger, but Arad Huse. What the miner was doing there the Gambolier did not know. No gold or other attraction existed in that barren region, as far as he was aware, and Arad was not one to take to labor for the sake of seeing Nature, or to get exercise.

So Gabe retained his position and let Arad come on at his leisure.

Watching the miner drew Gabe's attention more particularly to the vicinity before him, and this led to a discovery. He suddenly perceived a peculiar something in the depression just ahead of him—what it was he did not at first know, but as he looked closer it took on a most striking likeness to a human form.

It lay close to the bed of a small stream, and might have been washed there, though the stream did not appear powerful enough for that.

It was right in Arad's path, and, obeying an impulse, Gabe sprung down from his perch and partially concealed himself from view.

"We'll see what Mr. Huse will do about it," thought the Gambolier.

Arad came on rapidly, his course direct and unwavering. The Gambolier saw him reach the object by the stream. If he expected a start of surprise he was soon undeceived. Arad calmly paused and drew from under his coat—a garment he rarely wore—a long, slender board. This he threw down on the ground. He then began to look about as if in search of something.

Gabe grew interested. The composure with which the miner had acted was the best possible evidence that he had known of the presence of the thing by the stream—the dead man, if that was what it was.

After some delay Arad appeared to find what he desired. He picked up the board and began to drive it into the earth. The washing of the stream had left a thick deposit of sand there, and he had no difficulty in making an impression.

Gabe was at first puzzled; then he gained a suspicion which he felt might be wholly wrong. It was worth while to watch, and this he did with interest.

Arad worked zealously and the excavation grew. Now and then he paused and looked around, and this suggested the possibility to the Gambolier that he might yet be seen by the digger. There was no chance to retreat, however, and he had to stay where he was.

Back of him was a kind of a recess, and as he investigated to see if he could improve his position, he chanced to observe something new. In a little nook he saw a package of some sort.

He was in just the mood for search, so he lay hold of the thing and pulled. Out came a brown paper, with some heavy object inside. He did not delay in learning what it was, and as he unrolled the paper he had the explanation.

More than that, he had a revolver.

Instinctively Gabe glanced toward the man lying near Arad. Did the revolver have any connection with the dead man?

The association was suggestive, any way.

The weapon did not seem to have been long in its present quarters. It was not only free from rust, but appeared to be wholly new. Examining further, the Gambolier found that five chambers contained cartridges. The other showed the effects of recent discharge, and was slightly discolored.

"I am on the trail of a tragedy!" Gabe murmured.

There was nothing else in the paper, and nothing about the latter which would lead to the identification of the owner, it seemed. Nevertheless, he put it away with the revolver, resolved to give the matter further consideration.

All this while Arad was busy, and as his labor took form it became more an object of interest to Gabe. The miner was making an excavation long and broad, and if the observer had doubted what its purpose was, he did so no longer.

"A grave!" he muttered. "Why is Arad so kind to the unknown?"

Arad's kindness was but superficial. He did not seek to bury his man so deep as would have seemed necessary to some. While the pit was still shallow he ceased work and threw the board aside. Then he grasped the lifeless man by the shoulders and dragged him to the excavation without ceremony.

Dropping the body in without delay, he promptly began to cover it over with sand.

By this time Gabe was thoroughly interested. He knew not who the dead man had been, but he was a human being who was being put out of sight with scant ceremony, while the secrecy of the interment suggested that the miner had some guilty secret to hide as he hid the body.

"So we go!" Gabe mused, with feeling few at Shadow Shaft would have credited him with. "One day we are in the flush of manhood; the next, Death cuts us down, and we don't always find a hallowed spot to rest in. Yonder victim may have been gay and full of genius; he may have been the idol of loving friends. It is just as likely he was none of these, but few there are who are not deserving of a fit place to lie down when the great battle is fought and lost!"

Meditating thus, he watched Arad work. The burial was soon accomplished. There was less sand to put in than there had been to take out, and it only remained to cast the overflow into the stream and the task was accomplished.

Arad looked relieved and brushed the grave over with care.

Never during the work had he failed to glance around frequently, but he had not seen the man in ambush.

Now, he took a final survey and appeared ready to go. Gabe did not interrupt. He was glad to get rid of the miner, for he had something to do, himself. Thus, when Arad tossed the board into the brook and started back toward the town, he was willing he should make the best possible time.

He watched the grave-digger recede and vanish among the hills and attendant rocks.

Even then the Gambolier was slow to come out of his place of concealment, but when satisfied it was safe he did so with zeal. He was eager to learn more of this mysterious affair. He knew enough of Shadow Shaft and its ways to be aware it was very unusual for any one to be about there, and several inquiries naturally arose. Why had the stranger come there? Who had killed him?—if, as was suspected, he had met with foul play. What did Arad know about it?

And who was this victim?

The board had washed away, but Gabe was too much in earnest to seek for trifles. With his bare hands he began to dig at the sand.

In a few minutes he had accomplished the task and uncovered the body. Death had not been recent. This he saw at first sight, and he had no easy labor to learn all he wished. He found much that was very suggestive, however, and he sat on the sand and looked and meditated.

After a long silence he began to speak aloud:

"So might he have appeared under like circumstances. He had many points of resemblance. Time cannot do away with all things. So might he have looked!"

Arousing, somewhat, he made an examination which revealed more yet. A knife wound showed for itself, and as it was in the back, it was clear the victim had not made it himself.

"Murder!" murmured Gabe Gall. "Let him be whom he may, it was a deed of violence which preceded this long rest. Murdered! By whom? Why? When? How? And was the dead man once called Philemon Bond?"

The Gambolier was showing his hand, yet he was a sorely-puzzled man. Those at Shadow Shaft who imagined they had solved his secret in full were very much in error. If he was not what he claimed, he was, also, not what they thought him, and he had less light than he would have had if he had been acting the part ascribed to him by some of those most interested.

Somehow, he could not bring himself to think it was Arad who had done the murder. If it was, the miner had shown a strange lack of common prudence in letting the body lie exposed so long. He had, however, come there, that day, with the intention of interring it. Why? Plainly, he did not desire the affair to become public.

"He is in some way mixed up with the matter," Gabe could not but decide. "He may have some person he wishes to protect. The mystery at the town is far-reaching, as I have before seen. He is in it, but how? A pretty case this would be for a detective!"

A smile flitted across the speaker's face, as if he saw some joke in his own statement, but he did not long linger on trivial things.

"What am I to do now?" he wondered. "If I tell the tale at Shadow Shaft I can no longer fly in an atmosphere of secrecy, and, moreover, it would fall to Leland Sherwin to investigate the case. No; much as I could wish it, I can't carry the story to the people, unless I change my whole course immediately and permanently."

Another period of thought followed; then he replaced the body in the rude grave and covered it up as it had been before.

Having obliterated all signs, he went out of sight of the place. There he reproduced the revolver he had found in the recess. Since the examination which showed the victim had died by knife and not by revolver, the latter weapon had lost much of its original meaning, but he still thought it must have had some connection with the tragedy.

He intended to preserve it and learn who had been its owner, if it was in his power to do so.

There was nothing about the weapon which told a plain tale. He searched in vain for private marks, and was led to believe it would be a matter of patient search—perhaps, of long search.

Finding there was no more he could do, he left the locality and began his return to the town. He was careful not to take a course which would bring him into contact with Arad Huse, and, so far as he could see, the effort at secrecy was a complete success.

He certainly saw no one on the way.

Reaching Shadow Shaft, he went to the office of Sherwin & Fearing. His main object was merely not to let the partners forget him.

Major Fearing was the only one in.

"Hallo!" Gabe saluted, with his usual nonchalant familiarity. "How is everything? Where are the cigars?"

"Locked up!" the major sourly replied.

"Give us the key!"

"Mr. Gall, I have to find my own cigars," was the suggestive reply.

"You play in hard luck," Gabe serenely declared.

"Why shouldn't other men do the same?"

"They ought. This habit of begging trifles is reprehensible. Is the key handy?"

Fearing saw no help for it, and he brought out the desired article, but with a frown on his face. He dared not refuse.

Gabe took the key and unlocked the drawer. As he did so he saw the cigar-box, and he saw more. Close beside it was a revolver, and he was at once impressed with a strange fact. The revolver—he had seen one like it!

CHAPTER XIX.

GETTING AT THE SECRET.

GABE was in momentary danger of losing his iron-bound calmness and flippancy. There might be a thousand revolvers like the one in the drawer, but he certainly knew of one which, unless he was making a great error, was its exact mate.

The other was in his own pocket; it was that he had taken from the recess among the rocks.

Recovering his composure, he took a cigar and proceeded to light it with deliberation.

"Same old brand," he remarked, with an air of satisfaction. "You and Sherwin use rare judgment in your selection, by Jove! I like them!"

The major glared and said nothing.

Mr. Gall finished his lighting process, and then carelessly took up the revolver.

"That's a neat little weapon," he approvingly said.

"You need not ask for that!"

"Then it's yours?"

"Yes, it is."

"A neat toy. Are they on sale here?"

"Revolvers are to be had here, but probably not one like that. I got it in Denver, a few weeks ago."

"Only one of its kind, eh?"

"Sherwin has its mate. I bought the two, and gave him one."

"Wonder if he would sell his?"

"Sell it? I tell you it was a present from me. If he did sell it, or give it away, he would be doing a very ungentlemanly thing!"

"Oh! I don't know; I should pay cash—as soon as I got the cash, myself."

Gabe smiled airily. He was as much at ease as ever, now, though Fearing was in a passion he could not wholly control. The junior partner was thoroughly in awe of Gabe Gall, but his temper caused him to often tread on the verge of a revolt even if he knew revolt was out of the question.

It was terribly annoying to him to have this fellow set up as his master, but so it was. Unless he some time broke away and made a desperate fight, he was slave to the Gambolier.

Gabe handled the revolver with a show of carelessness. Each moment increased his belief that he had found the exact mate of that which had been among the rocks, and under the light of Fearing's revelation, the fact became very suggestive.

Leland had owned the mate to the major's deadly toy. Where was the other weapon, now?

He still stood handling it when Sherwin, himself, entered the office. Gabe smiled genially.

"Hallo! old man! How goes it? Want to have a little target firing, for a change?"

"I am not a marksman," somberly answered Leland.

"Yet, I understand you have a revolver."

Sherwin looked at his partner.

"Maje tells me he presented the mate of this to you. Now, I claim to be a shooter from Miss-ville. Get your gun, and we'll go out and try our luck. I'll bet neither of us can hit the target, unless it deliberately dodges in front of the bullet."

"I don't shoot," responded Leland.

"Nor I; but let us have a little amusement."

"Seek some better shot than I."

Leland was showing a degree of embarrassment which was rather surprising.

"What?" cried Gabe, banteringly, "won't you take my challenge?"

"Do for heaven's sake go out and shoot the fellow, Sherwin!" exclaimed Fearing. "Yes; shoot him, figuratively or in sober earnest!"

"There you have it!" laughed the Gambolier. "Now, Lele, go in with me. Where's your gun?"

Leland continued to be embarrassed. He now addressed his partner directly.

"I'm sorry, major," he explained, "but I've lost the revolver. You know I told you at the start that I did not know enough to pull a trigger. Well, I intended to take due care of it, but I put it away and it got out of sight. It was in the house, in the book-case in the parlor. It's gone now, and how it went I don't know. I suppose some one stole it, but I can't name the thief. I am very sorry, since it was your present, and I meant to keep it well; but I am no marksman, and it got the better of me."

This long explanation was unusual for the banker. He seemed to feel the loss of the revolver much more than was to be expected. Was

this because, as he wished to convey, he had failed to properly guard a gift, or was there a deeper reason?

"That's unlucky," returned Fearing, with composure, "but such things will happen."

Gabe had been watching for the effect of the senior partner's statement, but he could not decide whether the men were playing a part or not.

"Did it go before I came, Lele?" he inquired.

"I think so."

"Did you loan it to any one?"

"No."

"Well, if stolen, I am not the fellow who did it. Who else did?"

"Tom, Dick or Harry!"

With this curt answer Sherwin turned to his desk. The Gambolier saw that he was not going to get any satisfaction, so he relapsed into silence and smoked his cigars with an appearance of relish. The partners gave attention to business, and he was not able to find any sign of perturbation in their manner.

He had, however, satisfied himself on one point. While the supposition was not proven, it seemed he had learned who was the owner of the revolver found by the cliff. Leland had confessed the loss of one like Fearing's, and the fact was too significant to be accounted for on more than one basis, Gabe thought.

Sherwin said his weapon had been stolen, or otherwise spirited away. Was this the truth, or had he used it at the stream and then put it away where the Gambolier found it?

Mr. Gall watched the partners through half-closed eyelids and, smoking the good cigar, wondered where the truth lay.

Footsteps sounded outside the door and another man appeared. It was the landlord of the Glory Gideon Hotel. He gave his attention to Leland, at once.

"Mr. Sherwin," he began, "I have called upon you to get information concerning one whom you are acquainted with—Miss Zylpha Mayne."

Leland seemed to grow angry.

"I don't know her!" he declared.

"Why, she called on you when she first came to Shadow Shaft."

"What of it?"

"Now, you say you don't know her."

"There are different kinds of 'don't know.' In this case it simply means I don't want to know, and will not!"

The banker made the explanation with more force than appeared necessary. It was clear the subject was distasteful to him.

"I am not answerable for any bills she may run up," he added. "I can't support all the run-to-seed persons who come to Shadow Shaft!"

Gabe Gall smiled calmly. He understood the allusion.

"I'm not asking anything of the sort," retorted the landlord, with some temper. "I am quite able to run my own hotel, especially with customers who pay in advance, as she did. What I did come here for, if I may explain without having my head bitten off, is that Miss Mayne has mysteriously disappeared."

Leland looked up with languid interest.

"You say she has paid up. What do you care?"

"Do you ask the question in seriousness?"

"Certainly."

"Then you are a scoundrel!" was the warm retort. "I am the landlord of a hotel, and not in the same class with one of your standing, but I am not deaf to the requirements of common decency, especially when a woman's safety is at stake!"

It was not all a matter of policy which made Sherwin turn around with a different expression on his face.

"Have you really cause to fear harm has come to her?"

"I should not be here if I had not."

"You say she has disappeared. How?"

The master of the Glory Gideon had not applied the term of ill-flavor to Leland with so much hostility as might be supposed, and he grew more amiable.

"I only know she went from her room at night, leaving no clew behind her."

"Perhaps she did not want to leave any."

"Ah! but she left her wearing apparel. No one would do that willingly, I should say; and even if it were so in the present case, there is one thing she would not have done—one of the blankets of her bed went at the same time. You see, she was missing in the morning, and we waited in vain for her to come back. The chambermaid noticed that her wearing apparel was still there, but was dull enough to suppose she had taken another suit, and it did not dawn upon us for some time that anything was wrong. Now, we are sure there is."

Leland's expression was really serious.

"Do you think she went without anything to wear?"

"We are sure of it."

"You have given this matter more thought than I; what is your opinion in the case?"

"That she has been abducted for reasons unknown to me. As I make it out, some one took her away so hastily that no effort was made to

carry her clothing along. No woman in her right senses would leave anything of the kind, even if she had a dozen suits to fall back upon. And why should any one who went of her own accord, descend to so small a theft as to take away a bed-blanket, when she could take more?"

"She couldn't take the room," suggested Fear-

ing. "As a clincher, I'll add that she left her horse: an animal worth three hundred dollars, if a cent."

In that region such an argument was a "clincher" indeed, and there were no more skeptical remarks made.

Leland remained silent so long that the landlord again spoke:

"What do you know about her, Mr. Sherwin?"

The banker moved uneasily.

"Not much," he confessed.

"She called on you. Was it as a friend or an enemy?" bluntly demanded the landlord.

"I'll be frank with you. We were once better friends than we are now. When she called at my house, here, I did not see fit to receive her with especial cordiality."

"Do you know aught against her?"

"No," replied Leland, in a low voice.

"Will you help in finding her?"

"Most certainly. I am sorry to hear it is thought she is in trouble, and whatever you can suggest in her aid I will help to do. I say whatever you can suggest, because this is not so new to you as to me. You may have thought and gained some idea. If so, let us consider it at once."

"Well, I haven't any plan, as yet."

"Did she show any sum of money around the hotel?"

"No."

"Who should abduct her?"

"That's what I hoped you could tell me."

Leland arose and paced the room. The master of the Glory Gideon no longer had occasion to complain of indifference. Sherwin had forgotten his doubts and bitterness against Zylpha, and he forgot, too, that so many eyes were upon him. His face was troubled and grave.

Finally he came to a stop near the landlord.

"Has search been made?"

"No."

"Let it be done at once. Find men who know something about trail-following, if you can, and bid them scour the whole country for signs. If any trail is found leading away from Shadow Shaft which may possibly be that of the abductors, let it be followed to the ends of the earth, if need be. If something is not speedily discovered, put up a poster announcing a reward. Stay! it is my place to do this!"

He took another turn around the office.

"Yes," he added, presently, "it is my place, and it shall be done. Major, you can care for the office; I have other business to do. Come, landlord; we will solve this mystery ahead of all other things!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE CAST-OFF CREW IN TROUBLE.

AMAZON MOLL received a message from a woman in the village informing her that she would confer a favor upon the message-sender by calling at once. She was about the only associate Moll had, so the latter decided to obey the call.

As none of the men who honored the name of Huse was about the premises, this would necessitate the leaving of the house without a guard, and, therefore, with no guardian for Zylpha; but as visitors never came there, and she had seen no stir over Zylpha's disappearance, she determined to risk it.

Zylpha was a stranger in Shadow Shaft. Perhaps every one had ignored her disappearance, anyhow. Moll would have done so; why should any one care for somebody who could be of no use practically?

Arguing thus, the Amazon put on her outer garments and left the hut. She then walked rapidly toward the other end of the town.

She was barely out of sight when a bushy head showed at the top of a rock near at hand, and a grim smile illuminated a rough and seamed countenance.

"Worked ter a charm!" muttered the owner of the smile.

Then Ab Huse emerged from ambush and hurried into the building. Straight to the door of Zylpha's room he went and removed the bar which served as a fastening. Then he entered.

Zylpha was sitting in a way which indicated a disconsolate frame of mind. She had been hardened to adversity, as it were, but was not wholly proof against the feelings natural to one in her position.

The appearance of Ab did not seem to promise anything out of the usual course of events, and she looked at him with only languid interest, but he soon aroused her curiosity. He made a warning motion, and then came directly to the point.

"Miss, I want a word with you, an' there ain't no time to lose. Don't say nothin' frivolous; for it's touch an' go whether I get in my little speech. I want ter address of ye."

"Yes?" she returned.

"You ain't in love with your life hyer, I s'pose?"

"How can I be?"

"Wal, I didn't expect it, an' I'm rather glad you ain't; it gives me a show. Miss, you hev enemies hyer, but don't count me among them. I ain't o' that sort; I'm yer friend. See?"

Zylpha was skeptical.

"If so, you can prove it."

"How?"

"By liberating me."

"It is just that I come hyer ter see ye about. I hev seen with anger that you have been subjected ter something you don't like, an' it is all ag'in' my idee o' what is right. Don't class me among yer enemies, miss!"

Zylpha noticed he did not advance much with his proof of friendship. She persisted:

"Release me, and your devotion to justice will be established. Sir, my position here is most unpleasant. If you will set me free I will bless you forever. Will you do it?"

"That's just what I want ter talk about," responded Ab, disingenuously. "Thar ain't no time ter take ye away, now, fer the coast ain't clear, but I mean ter watch fer the chance an' do it. It's a powerful shame ter keep ye hyer, ef it is my folks that're in it; an' I won't uphold them in it. Not by a durned sight!"

"Then let me go."

"But I can't, now. They are all in sight, an' I must look out for the opportunity afore I can make the rifle go. Ef we did try it now, we should come ter grief so quick we should not know what we were doin'. But I'll do it or break a leg!"

"I do not hear them in the next room."

"No; they ain't there. Ef they was I couldn't a-got at ye, nohow. Still, they're so nigh it would be folly ter try an' do anything. We hev got ter wait."

The miner saw the doubt expressed on her face and hastened to add:

"It's all right, but they're three ter me one, an' I can't get away with the whole gang."

"Go to the landlord of the Glory Gideon, and I feel sure he will find some way to help you out. It is not right," continued Zylpha, diplomatically, "for you to bear all the danger and run the risk of getting into trouble with your relatives; let somebody else take the risk. Simply go to the town and give the alarm."

Ab had not thought of receiving this advice, and he did not know how to meet it.

"That plan looks all right on the surface, but—but you see my relatives, hyer, hev got things so arranged et would be folly ter try it. I can't explain, now, fer they are likely ter interrupt me at any time; but jest you trust in me. I'm bound ter get you out ef sech a thing is in the books, an' don't you ferget it. I ain't no tough, an' my heart has been moved by yer sufferin's. I admire you a pile, so I'll get you away or die fer you!"

Ab had waxed emphatic, but his reiteration, instead of proceeding to action, was the best of proof that he was not a sincere worker in her behalf. Zylpha saw through this, though she could not tell just what new thing was at work against her.

She did not reply, and he added:

"Yes, I admire you!"

"This is the time to prove it."

"How?"

"By releasing me."

"What'll you do ef I will?"

Ab thrust his head forward, and his eyes glowed with a hungry light. He could take her out at once, but had thought it best to keep her there until he could add to the weight of obligation she would be under, if he was the means of saving her.

Now, however, he would have given way to his feelings and taken any step if he could be assured she would go with him not only beyond the hut, but out of the town.

"I will thank you earnestly," Zylpha answered.

"Is that all?"

"I am poor—"

"Money I don't want!" declared the miner. "See! I am strong an' willin', an' what any man kin do I am ready ter do fer you. Ez soon ez I set eyes on you I jest fell down and worshiped ye, an' I ain't got over it. Fer you I'd do anything. I've got strong arms an' a strong heart, an' I'd work fer you like a dog, ef necessary. Oh! you kin trust me; I'm ready ter help ye to the limit!"

Ab had planned a system of slow advance as that most likely to accomplish his end, but his feelings had run away with him. He had spoken; he had made himself understood.

More than that—more than he intended—he had caused Zylpha to realize that he was just as dangerous as those who had taken a rougher way to impress their interest in her upon her notice.

She shrunk back.

"We forget the point at issue."

"That's a fact," Ab admitted, uneasily.

"Will you not let me go?"

"I would, gladly, ef I could, but I have told you the exact truth about it. They're close at hand, an' it never would do fer me ter try an' help ye away, now. In fact, ef I stay hyer any

longer I run the resk o' losin' all. I must go, now, but bear this in mind—I'll save you, or die fer you! I mean it!"

Ab had really grown anxious lest Amazon Moll should return, and he moved to the door.

"Remember," he said again, "I am your friend, an' will be ez long ez I live. Be o' good cheer; I'll save ye, yet. Good-by!"

With this he went out and fastened the door behind him. He left Zylpha without more hope than when he went in, and was not wholly satisfied, himself. As he beat a retreat from the house to the cover of the rocks he soliloquized:

"I kinder lost my head. Reckon I said some things over several times, but it's awful rough on a feller ter be in love. Reckon the best o' men an' women is jest ez bad as me. I didn't mean ter let on so plain, but mebbe it's jest as well she should know how I feel."

It was five minutes later when Moll returned.

Ab grinned with amusement. The summons which had called her away had been his work; he had seen the other woman and bribed her to send for Lute's wife.

"I beat ye, that time, old Tiger-cat!" he muttered. "Ef my helper holds her jaw you won't know it, either, until it's too late ter do me any harm. I mean ter beat ye all out an' jest enjoy the gal, an' I reckon my wits are sharp enough ter make it go."

Ab exulted a good deal over his artifice, and while Moll, after making sure Zylpha was not gone, was wondering that her friend should find it necessary to send for her on such trivial business, he was resting among the rocks and planning fresh triumphs.

Thus far the Huse brood had always hung together, but there was danger of a break. Ab's ambition to have some one nearer to him than his kindred had been was running away with all else.

"Ef I kin work it I'll leave them hyer an' go where me an' her kin begin life anew," he thought. "She's as purty as an angel, an' I kin afford ter be somebody besides a Huse vagabond ef she will help me. Ef she will? Why, she must!"

In the course of time the other Huses came home, and Ab emerged from his covert and joined them. Moll said nothing about her visit, as Ab well knew she would not. She had taken great liberty with Arad's orders when she went off and left Zylpha without any guard, and the leader of the Cast-off Crew would have stormed in earnest had he known of the matter.

He did not know, but Ab laughed to himself and imagined greater triumphs in the near future.

Arad was far from easy. He had proceeded under the idea that it would be possible to keep the stolen girl there and have no one suspect him, but he began to doubt.

If they did suspect and come to investigate, it would go hard with all the Huse gang.

"The rope fer us all!" he thought, and the notion was so disquieting that he went often to the door and looked down toward the lower part of the town.

Evening fell. He went down and looked and listened. Perhaps he was unfortunate in striking the wrong crowd, but he heard nothing said which would show especial interest on the part of any one.

Zylpha's disappearance was casually mentioned, but he did not find anybody who seemed to care, or was ambitious to find her.

He went home in better spirits, and, that night, lay down to sleep with more confidence than he had been feeling.

Night was over the mountain and the hut. Arad dreamed, and his dreams, at first pleasant, grew just the reverse. He imagined a giant serpent had invaded the hut and caught him in its folds.

He awoke in terror.

CHAPTER XXI.

TROUBLE ALL AROUND.

ARAD started up. His wits came quickly as he did so, and he knew he was not in the grasp of any devouring monster, but he had no sooner arrived at this happy state of mind than he had a fresh shock.

There was a collision and some one fell squarely over him, knocking him down again, and then falling upon him with almost-stunning force.

Under ordinary circumstances he would have decided it was one of his brothers and merely growled in anger, but this could not be taken for granted when such conditions existed around him.

He was startled, once more, and as soon as the unknown scrambled off from him, which that person evidently made haste to do, he started to his knees.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

There was no reply, but he heard some one floundering around close at hand, making a sound as if he were vainly trying to get up from the floor.

Arad reached out and grabbed at a venture, but with such good aim that he found a sleeve in his hand.

"Surrender!" he ordered. "Give up, or I'll put a knife inter you!"

There was no reply, but with an agile wrench for which Arad did not give the unknown credit, the latter wormed away from him and was to be heard retreating along the floor.

Thoroughly aroused, Huse leaped to his feet and made a dash in the same direction. He felt the wind on his face and knew the door was open, but as he reached the spot he ran into it with full force; it had been closed at just the wrong time for him, and he suffered another painful shock.

"What's the racket?"

The question came in Ab's voice, but Arad was not in mood for explanation.

"Get a move on and catch him!" he shouted.

This was not plain enough to make Ab of any use, and he stood in stupid inactivity while his elder brother tore the door open and rushed out. The whole West was before Arad, but he saw nothing more. Look as he might he could see no other person, near or distant.

Naturally, he was not especially clear-headed, and after a wild circuit of the hut he came back in a state of rage and fear. Ab had done one good deed by lighting a lamp, so the leader had a chance to see the interior of the place.

"What the durn is up?" Ab demanded.

"Some one has been in here; that's what's up!" replied Arad, quickly. "Did you see nothin'?"

"I only woke up when you was flounderin' around like a bear in a trap. Has any one been in? Kin it be somebody was after Zylpha?"

"Jest my idee. Give me the light!"

He did not need to carry the search in that quarter. The inner door opened and Amazon Moll, aroused by the noise, put in an appearance. To his excited inquiry she made answer that Zylpha was still there, so one cause of fear was removed.

"Somebody has been in here," explained Arad, anxiously. "I started ter my knees jest in time fer him ter fall over me. Of course I didn't see him, an' I don't know what he was like. No; an' I don't know what he was after. I wish I did."

Lute Huse came out of the small recess he and his wife occupied when they had no one for Moll to watch, and the family held a discussion. For some time they could see absolutely no explanation of the affair, but Arad finally caught the clew suddenly.

"My boots!" he exclaimed, pointing to those articles as they lay on the floor.

"What about them?" Moll demanded.

"Why, I always put them on the shelf, and now they are kickin' around loose."

"You forgot ter put 'em away, ter-night."

"Not much, I didn't; I put them where I always do. Say, now I think on't, I remember that when the feller tumbled over me he did drop something which fell with a clatter. Durn it all! 'twas a thief who tried to steal my boots!"

If Arad had purchased the boots like an honest man his look of alarm would have caused them to smile at him, but they, as well as himself, knew he had stained his hand red with blood to get this pair, and it was not anything any of them could afford to laugh at.

"You'd better burn them durned old boots!" advised Moll. "I ain't superstitious enough ter think they would bring you bad luck because you got them as you did, but it's not policy ter wear a dead man's things around where some one may see them an' git onto the game."

Arad had fallen into deep thought.

"There must be an explanation to this," he finally remarked. "Et was no chance occurrence, an' what it does mean is a matter o' much importance ter us. Now, do any o' you remember anybody who was interested in them boots?"

"Dick!" Ab exclaimed.

"Jes' so, by durn! Kin it hev him been who tried the raffle, ter-night?"

"Wal, he tried ter buy an' couldn't. He may hev tried ter steal. Ef it was him you ain't got nothin' ter be afraid o'."

"I ain't so sure o' that!" declared Amazon Moll. "Dick is a fool, but that don't mean he is harmless. Fools sometimes do more harm than anybody else. Mebbe he has been put up to it by some one else."

"I thought it was queer he was so set on buyin' them boots," Arad went on. "Ef he is the feller who has tried ter steal them, he was hired by some one ter buy them, at first."

"Put it as you will, it shows you've got ter ring the neck o' that brother o' yours?" pursued Moll, who never let a chance slip to show her hatred of Dreamer Dick.

Nobody demurred. The gang was thoroughly upset by the disturbance of the night. They had nerve enough, but were so clearly aware that they might have to face the edict of Judge Lynch, if their recent work was known, that they had to be alert and cautious.

They continued to discuss the case in all its visible bearings, and though no real light was obtained, they were unanimous on one point. The intrusion of the night was a sign of danger, and they needed to be up and doing if they would save themselves from trouble.

"I'll see Dick," Arad promised, "an' soon hev the whole story out o' him. He's so shallow I kin get every secret he has in about the shake of

a deer's tail. Jost you rest easy an' see me do it."

The speaker set the example by going to bed. He lay down on his boots, bound that no one should outwit him, but the night passed without demonstration from any source.

In the morning Arad went down to the town. He had no very clear idea of where he was likely to find Dick, but was lucky enough to run upon him without difficulty. The bug-hunter met his brother with a gentle smile. Arad went about his work cautiously, but finally wound around to the matter of interest.

"Dicky," he spoke, in his most persuasive way, "you was sayin' something about them boots. Do you know anybody who wants ter buy 'em?"

He watched sharply as he made the inquiry, but the youth did not show alarm, confusion or unusual interest.

"Yes; I do," he responded.

"Anybody else?"

"No."

"Could you sell them ag'in?"

"I shouldn't try. I'm the one who wants them, and I have the cash to pay."

"Where kin you get money?"

"I can make more than you can, Arad," the Dreamer calmly answered. "I send my specimens to Denver, and they sell them to some one in the East. Folks laugh at my bug-hunting, but it pays as well as digging gold. We all have our lines of business."

Arad had never dealt in specimens, and he was to be excused for being skeptical. He was angry that Dick should try to make him believe anything of the sort, but kept his temper.

"Dicky, ef you kin get me a customer among the rich folks I'll sell them boots, but I wouldn't take the money from you!"

"I'm no agent," Richard serenely explained. "I do business only for myself. If you won't sell me the boots, I can't find a customer. A business man can't take time to go around and curry trade like that!"

"S'pose I gave them to you?"

"Just as you say."

"You'd like them?"

"Yes."

The placid manner of the boy exasperated the leader of the Cast-off Crew. He had expected Dick to jump at the chance and betray himself, but Dick did not seem to care half so much about it as he had done before. Showing some temper, Arad added:

"What were you doing at the house last night?—our house?"

Richard's eyes did not waver in the least.

"I wasn't there. Did you think you saw me?"

"Come off! You were there, an' you almost broke yer neck over me. Have you forgot that? You had somethin' in yer hand, an' you fell an' lost it. Would you like that thing now?"

Richard shook his head.

"I wasn't there. If you thought I was, you made a mistake. No; I was down at Sherwin's, and stayed there all the time."

Arad was in a rage by this time. The easy task he had mapped out did not make itself visible. Richard was not covered with guilty confusion, nor did he bite at the bait offered. The elder brother could only infer he was signally defeated by the "fool" of the family, and it was a bitter pill to swallow. He aspired to do Dick bodily harm. As he was not reckless enough to satisfy his desires, he did the best he could at keeping his temper, but registered a vow to get even with the "fool" later on.

Leaving Dick, he wandered down the street.

At the hotel he saw a group of men collected around some notice affixed to the wall, and he approached to read it.

It proved to be of interest, and was in these words:

"\$500 REWARD."

"Whereas, a young lady of the name of Zylpha Mayne, until recently a guest at Shadrach Pelcon's Glory Gideon Hotel, Shadow Shaft, has disappeared mysteriously, and under circumstances calculated to awaken the fear that she has been seized and conveyed away by enemies or lawless men of some sort, the undersigned does call upon all good citizens to do their utmost to recover her from her enemies."

"And furthermore, a reward of \$500 is offered for her safe recovery and return to Shadow Shaft."

"Let due zeal be used by all, and whoever can spare the time is requested to engage in the search, without delay."

"Remember, Five Hundred Dollars!"

"LELAND SHERWIN."

Arad rubbed his stubbly chin.

"Durned ef I don't wish I could take part in that hunt!" he thought, greedily. "It's a pile o' money; a mighty big pile o' money. Ef I had not been fool enough ter kill Zylpha's man, I'd hev the reward, by thunder! Et's more than we kin get any other way."

It was out of the question for him to dream of rescuing his own captive, but the event had awakened a lively fear in his mind.

Was it safe to keep Zylpha in the town? Thus far the Huse brood had been very successful, and had lived for years unmolested, but if a

general search was made they could not hope to escape notice.

"Folks are down on us!" he thought, complainingly, as he walked away. "We hev a bad name—though we don't deserve it—an' we must look out now. I reckon we shall have ter take the gal away, but we'll delay a bit an' see how things look."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FIRE-BUG.

WHEN night came the Huse brood was on the alert. All admitted it looked as if they had got to get out of Shadow Shaft, or, at least, to get Zylpha away; but they were just obstinate enough to resist doing what their better judgment told them they ought to do.

"We'll make a fight first, anyhow!" declared Arad.

He and Ab had been down to the heart of the town all the evening. With hawk-like vigilance they had studied the visible signs, and watched for evidence of the expected raid, but there was nothing ominous to occupy their attention.

Trailers had been out to look for signs, but no one had been heard to suggest that the abductors might be in the midst of the settlement. Guilt sees danger even where none exists, however, and the signs were not confided in implicitly. The honest part of the population might be playing a part, the Cast-off Crew thought.

When they retired it was not in the usual order. Arad lay down close to the hut door, while Ab was posted a few rods down the hill. By this arrangement they expected to detect and defeat any possible raid upon their stronghold.

Midnight passed without an alarm. The guards were enjoying needed sleep. Everything seemed to be in promising shape.

At one side of the hut, but not that where Ab was keeping watch, there was a stir among the rocks. A form moved quietly along until a position was gained where the mover could survey the building. This he proceeded to do, and his head, raised above a rock, might have reminded one of the swaying head of a snake.

After a long pause he passed on again and went near the hut.

"Mystery!" he murmured. "This is grand!"

It could be no other than Dreamer Dick, and if his brothers had been awake to see him they would have been confirmed in their opinion that he was not so loyal to their interests as he might have been.

They, however, slept in unconsciousness of the events thus under way.

Richard advanced with steps so light that Arad, vigilant as he hoped to be, heard nothing. Dick saw him, but it only made the prowler the more careful, and he passed the point of danger without trouble.

He reached the door and opened it as cautiously as before. Entering, he paused until heavy breathing enabled him to locate Lute. This done, he turned the slide of a bull's-eye lantern in true burglar style. By its light he soon formed his plans and set about executing them. He collected several articles and put them in a pile. Then he poured over them from a bottle what was indisputably kerosene, and had all ready for some bold step.

Next he gave his attention to the door of the inner room. The fastening was nothing for one on the outside, and he soon removed all impediment to action.

Flashing the light within he saw Zylpha and Amazon Moll.

He had expected no end of trouble at this stage of affairs, but he was delighted to see the former regarding him with wide-open eyes, while Moll was sound asleep. He made a quick motion and retreated somewhat. Igniting a match, he started a flame among the oil-saturated things.

It sprang up quickly, and he did not pause to see the result. Re-entering the other room, he moved toward Zylpha with another gesture of warning. He saw she was restrained of her liberty by a cord, and with singular ease for an alleged "fool" he cut the impediment and assisted her from the couch.

He made a warning motion, but it was hardly needed. She had grasped the situation and was ready to do her part.

Holding fast to her hand he led her from the place. The increasing blaze in the outer room aroused her fears anew, but she was given no time to think. Very soon they were in the open air.

The departure was made none too soon. Dick heard a start and exclamation behind them, and he urged Zylpha on with act and word. Taking the same route by which he had come, he hurried her to the rocks.

By that time the light was showing plainly in the hut, and Lute's voice struck just as forcibly on the ear. He was fighting the flames and floundering around wildly. Then, too, came the voice of Amazon Moll, as she hastened to his aid, and Richard chuckled with satisfaction.

"Come!" he said, to Zylpha. "Our place is not here, and we may be better employed."

She needed no urging, and they hastened toward the town. As they were going out of sight they saw Arad and Ab bounding to the rescue.

The rescuer chuckled.

"It will not burn down," he remarked. "I was careful not to put on enough for that, but they required a lesson. I think it will work. Oh! won't it be a glorious mystery for them?"

It was not until they were in a place comparatively safe that anything more was said. Then Zylpha expressed her thanks warmly.

"You had to turn against your own kin to help me," she reminded. "It was kind, it was noble in you!"

"You think so, but *they* won't. But they will never find out who did it. It will be a grand mystery!"

As usual, the bug-hunter's mind ran in one channel, but he had done his work not less well. The more Zylpha thought of it, and of the risk he had run, the more grateful she grew, and she thanked him with renewed warmth. He heard with dignity and gentle attention.

"I like you because you don't laugh at my trade," he explained, "and I was glad to help you, but we can't stop to talk about it. The fire seems to be out, and they will come down to see if you have got home. I don't want them to know I was the one who did it, and if we get out of sight before they can come, they will not know it was I who did help you."

Zylpha had no disposition to oppose this sensible decision, and with Richard's help she was soon in the hotel, and that, too, without awakening any one. Then Dick left her.

She had decided not to risk sleep that night, and though she found the landlord had made changes which made intrusion impossible without tearing the sash of the window to pieces, she did not change her mind. She sat down to meditate on her adventures and escape.

Although it might invite Arad and his brethren, she had left the light burning, and when she had recovered her composure a little she naturally took more notice of the room.

Her property had not been removed by the landlord, but on the table she saw one thing new to her: a small paper she at once proceeded to examine.

Not far had she read when her face flushed.

Surprise, doubt, incredulity and, at last, a flash of joy were pictured on her countenance. She had found the paper issued by Leland Sherwin, and the fact that he should offer a reward for her recovery was astonishing to her. She read it twice before she could believe the truth, and many times more before she could be satisfied with the reading.

"He cannot think me all bad, or he would not put his name to this document," she thought. "All may not be lost; I will hope on until I know there is no hope."

The notice was company for her the rest of the night, and she almost forgot her troubles of the past and the uncertainty of the future.

In the morning she prepared for the presence of others. Dreamer Dick had exacted a pledge that she would not tell where she had been, or who had rescued her. She now saw that many things rendered this bad for her, but there was no help for it. She would keep her pledge unless Dick released her from it, and this he was not likely to do willingly, since it would injure himself so much.

Landlord Shadrach Pelcon almost fell over his own feet when she walked into the breakfast-room. He did not exactly know whether he took her for a ghost or something else, but did know it was a great surprise to him.

When he had rallied somewhat he welcomed her with many exuberant words, and almost danced a jig to express his joy. Then he wanted to know where she had been all the while, and how she had got back.

Then Zylpha tasted the consequences of the policy of silence. She could not explain further than to say she had been a prisoner and escaped—something which did not by any means satisfy Shadrach.

While they were in this unsettled condition, voices sounded outside the window.

Both looked and saw Leland at the head of several men.

"Go to your homes," he directed. "I give you until noon to get in trim. Then meet me at this point, and we will go out again."

"They been hunting all night," observed Pelcon, in a low voice; "yes; hunting for you. Mr. Sherwin led the party, and they never got in all the night. That's what he's done for you."

Just why he explained this, he did not know, though he remembered with some symptoms of remorse that he had once spoken severely to Leland—a good man who did not appear to deserve it.

Zylpha's eyes dilated. Leland had passed a sleepless night in the bills in her behalf. It seemed too good to be true, and she found herself unable to utter a word.

The banker's aids left him, and then he entered the hotel. Zylpha did not know whether to run or stand her ground, and, as a result, simply remained where she was. He came in looking pale and weary.

"Pelcon," he exclaimed, "I want you to see the men and get them out for a general search. All the mines ought to shut down, and the miners go out to look for—"

Leland stopped short. He saw Zylpha.

"No need of it, sir," Shadrach replied.

"Here's the damsel, as you can see."

The "damsel" was studying Sherwin's face with breathless eagerness. How would he receive her? Had he searched for her because he remembered her more kindly when she was in trouble, or simply out of common humanity?

Was it fancy, or did she see a brightening of his face—a look of relief and gladness?

"It's all right, you see."

Pelcon felt obliged to break the pause again, and then Leland found his own tongue.

"It seems some of our men have been successful, after all. Or—did she come back some other way?"

Now, indeed, Zylpha felt the weight of the pledge she had made to Dreamer Dick. It would place her in a position mysterious enough to refuse information to any one, while as for Leland, she felt it would injure her own cause greatly and be unjust to him to withhold anything. Yet, she faced the difficulty resolutely.

"Mr. Sherwin," she made reply, "I have been in serious trouble—nothing else would have taken me away from here so strangely—and I have been saved in a way peculiar and unexpected. I have been the prisoner of evil-minded persons. More than that I, unfortunately, cannot tell, at present. I promised to remain silent, not thinking, then, how it would place me. I will try to take my pledge of silence back, and if permission is granted me, I shall be glad to tell the whole story."

The speaker waited anxiously to see the result of her words.

Sherwin's face grew grave, but his answer was not so unfavorable as she had expected.

"If any one in this town has been concerned in the affair, I certainly hope you will be able to aid us in bringing them to justice."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Pelcon. "Hang your promise! Speak out, at once; it's the only just way to use those who have labored so hard for you. Of course you'll tell all at once!"

"Not so fast!" cautioned Leland. "Miss Mayne says she is bound by a pledge. We cannot ask more than she is able to grant."

"Some pledges are better broke than kept—"

"The matter rests entirely with Miss Mayne!" decided Leland, with emphasis. "It is her privilege to use her judgment in the matter. The case is in your hands, wholly, madam. We have no right to urge you. Do as you think best, and if you decide to speak out, let us hear from you."

Zylpha was not able to tell whether the permission was granted in good will or resentment, but she could do no more than to take it as it expressed.

"Let me congratulate you on your escape," he resumed. "I have only one thing to add. We are not in a place known for lawless deeds, nor are we in a police-guarded city. Therefore, it will be to your interests, in the future, to take such measures as will result in your avoiding danger. Should you wish to see me, a messenger will find me at any time. I will now bid you good-morning!"

Zylpha only delayed him to express her thanks, which she did with much tact under the trying circumstances. Then he went his way and she was left to face the question:

"What does he really think of the situation?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

BROUGHT TO A CRISIS.

THE next morning Mrs. Dorcas Huse accosted Gabe Gall.

"How are you, good soul?" he inquired, in his usual genial manner. "Does the white dove of peace brood over your door, or is the brooder on strike?"

"Mr. Gall, I want to speak with you," she returned.

"Proceed, by all means."

The peculiar shimmer occasionally seen in the housekeeper's eyes was visible there, now.

"You told me," she went on, earnestly, "that you once saw a thing in your room which was ghost or—something else."

"Once!" Gabe lightly exclaimed; "well, I should say so! Several times this thing has come like Poe's raven and scared me into fits and colic. I assure you, I've almost taken to drink over it!"

"Then you've seen it again?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you seize it?"

"Who can seize a ghost?"

"Nonsense, man! It is human, and you are not superstitious enough to think otherwise."

"Fact, my good soul. Yes; it must have been human, but I am not slick enough to catch it."

"What is it? Who is it?"

The shimmer in her eyes had grown until it was almost startling. The Gambolier began to see what possibilities were in the woman.

"Now you have me. All my skill has thus far been of no avail in the chase. It may be John Brown of our household, or J. B. of more historic renown. I know not. It isn't malev-

olent, for it doesn't seek to do me harm. But it isn't to be caught. When I get up and try to grab the spook, the spook vanishes."

"Tell me just what it is like!"

"As I related at the start, it purports to be a large man. Further than that, I have not been able to learn."

Dorcas looked disappointed and fell into thought. Gabe was all interest, but he took his time to learn more, if more was to be learned. Finally she looked up again.

"When you first spoke to me about an intruder in your room I had some doubts that you were in earnest; I thought it might be a jest."

"I hope you don't doubt me now?"

"I am prepared to believe anything, for I know, myself, there are strange things transpiring in this house. You will remember I once asked you if you had been in the pantry, or kitchen. It was not through any trivial reason I asked."

"For some time past I have been aware that a person unknown to me was making raids upon my pantry. Almost every morning I missed food from there; a singular circumstance when one remembers that in this house all are fed royally, and welcome to eat whenever they see fit."

"I confess I at first suspected you, but I have done enough watching to be sure you are not the guilty one. Now, who is? Who should steal food in a house of plenty?"

Dorcas regarded Gabe eagerly, and it was clear she had made up her mind to make him a confidant.

"Well, this is a corker!" the Gambolier agreed.

"Have you no theory?"

"Give me time. It comes upon me of a sudden, and the only thing I can say at first blush is that I am not the robber. As you say, who can be? Have you no suspicion?"

The question was superfluous, and he knew it. Dorcas's troubled manner was the best evidence that she was taking him into her confidence, and doing it because she wanted some helper.

"I have no idea, and this frightens me!" she answered.

"Frightens you?"

Dorcas looked embarrassed.

"I mean, of course, it is calculated to make one nervous to be aware that a stranger has the run of the house like this."

"You are perfectly right. Can't you put a stop to it?"

"What can be done?"

"It has come upon me all of a sudden, and I haven't had time to get an idea, yet. Have you none?"

"No. I only know it worries me. Who should steal food in this house?—a house of plenty."

Gabe was fully interested. He saw that Dorcas was in earnest, and fully as much troubled as she had confessed. To him it would have appeared a very small matter that some one was a thief on such a small scale, but he knew Dorcas well enough to be sure she had ample cause for any uneasiness she showed.

"She has a reason for it which I don't know," was his decision. "Can I get her to confide in me?"

He tried. He expressed his sympathy in well-chosen words, and played the comforter to the best of his ability, all the while seeking for advantage in the step. Try as he did, however, he did not succeed in getting her to divulge.

Her secret was kept close.

Finally she cut the interview short, but not until an alliance, such as it was, had been formed between them. Gabe agreed to help her if he was able. She promised nothing, but the bond was made, nevertheless, and he hoped for the best.

Before she went away she exacted and readily received a promise of secrecy. The interview over she retreated to her own quarters, leaving Gabe to think and wonder. All he could see clearly was that the woman had a secret of some kind, and the seemingly simple robberies worried her in consequence.

"No wonder Dreamer Dick is fond of mystery," murmured the Gambolier. "Reared in such an atmosphere of mystery he could not be otherwise. I am only a pilgrim and a wanderer in Zion, but I have already caught on to enough to make a sober man stagger with the odor of prime old rye in his whiskers!"

Gabe was as airy as ever, but this did not prove he was inattentive to business. If he could not see so much in the food-stealing matter as Dorcas did, he was not in the least inclined to underrate it.

She was a long-headed woman who would not make any disturbance over a trifle, and he intended to know why she saw much in such an occurrence.

Having nothing else to do, he wandered away, and thus escaped witnessing another act in the drama, or the visible part thereof.

Down the street came Arad Huse with long steps. He had a determined air, and there was a swagger of assurance not pleasant to see as he brought up at Sherwin's. He did not wait to ring the bell, but marched in very composedly.

Ruth was alone in the parlor, and had no warning of his approach until he suddenly ap-

peared to her. Then her manner grew startled, while he stood grim and sullen at the door. He had not the wit to be suave. He had come to bully, and had no disposition to act in any other way.

"Good-mornin'!" he spoke, aggressively. "I've come ter see ye!"

There was no denying the fact, and Ruth did not think of anything else to say.

"I wanted ter see ye!" he reiterated. "I've come on business!"

Ruth was growing alarmed. His whole manner was such as to put fears in her mind, and she had not forgotten another interview between them. Was this to be a repetition of the other, or—worse?

"Miss," he again uttered, "I want you ter make some sort of decision. I made et clear ter you some days ago that I had business with you. I pointed out that I knew it was Leland Sherwin that murdered Philemon Bond, an' that 'twas ter your interests ter buy my silence. Thar ain't been no change sence then, an' now I want yer answer. What is it—yes, or no?"

"Yes, or no—to what?"

"Will you marry me?"

Ruth grew pale.

"Marry you?" she echoed.

"Didn't I talk English? Can't you understand United States? Wal, I might put it a bit simpler, I reckon, but that ought ter do. Yes; will ye marry me?"

"Indeed, I will not!"

"Indeed you will, or I'll put Leland where he would be glad ter make terms with a dog! I'll tell that he killed old Bond—"

"He did nothing of the kind!"

"Oh! didn't he?"

"Emphatically, he did not!"

"Wal, you know o' the dead man over in the hills. Ef you don't believe thar is one thar, go with me an' see. Et will speak fer itself, an' so will this!"

He suddenly produced a knife, and Ruth recognized the weapon he had shown her on a former occasion, claiming it had been found on the dead man in the hills—the knife she had readily recognized as Leland's.

Instinctively she put out her hand.

"Let me have it!" she exclaimed.

"Slowly, my dear; slowly! This is for me! It's the evidence I hev ter prove what I claim, an' I should be a fool ter give the thing up. I ain't got the hold on the big-bugs that you hev, but this knife goes funder than worldly power. While I hev it I am boss!"

He drew up his figure to its full height, and his manner grew more hostile. The thin varnish of the former occasion was gone, and all his evil qualities shone in force, if not in brightness.

Ruth tried to save herself by a pretense of boldness.

"You would not dare to speak that way if my brother was here!" she exclaimed.

"Wouldn't I? Ha! I would say to him: 'I am master hyer; who dares resist me?' Yes; an' I would go an' put my arm around yer waist like this—"

He tried to illustrate, but she retreated before him.

"Keep back!" she cried, in alarm. "Keep away, or I'll call for help! I will scream—"

"Do it ef you dare! Do it, an' I'll show you I am boss hyer—"

Arad seemed to have lost all prudence. He not only let his tongue run freely, but tried to follow up his advance and seize her. Matters were at this stage when footsteps sounded and, looking past her enemy, Ruth exclaimed!

"Leland!"

Arad turned and confronted the master of the house.

Sherwin's face was dark with anger.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, warmly.

It was a reprieve, and now it had come, Ruth remembered the charges against Leland and was reluctant to enter any complaint against the miner. Arad, however, was not so backward.

"Yer sister was entertainin' me," he explained with a swagger.

"And you—what were you doing, sir?"

"Tellin' her how much I loved her!"

"You, love her?"

"Oh! you needn't put it in that way, fer you can't scare me fer a cent, an' you may find it the wisest way ter use me well. I wa'n't lookin' fer you, but it's jest ez well we have met. I hev a word ter say ter you, Mr. Leland Sherwin, an' you want ter listen to it with care before you get on your high boss."

"Sir!" Leland retorted, "there is the door! The sooner you walk out of it, the better it will be for you!"

"You order me out, eh?"

"I do!"

Arad made a great effort to control himself. He felt he was master there, and his natural impulse was to act with all the coarseness of his nature, but he remembered this was not the plan he had marked out, and he managed to summon a measure of calmness.

"Before I go," he said, in a low voice, "let us speak of how Philemon Bond died!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A CHOICE OF EVILS.

RUTH glanced quickly at her brother. She would have been blind not to see that the shot took effect. Leland changed color, but he had been looking for the insinuation from some source for days, and he did not fail to act his part.

"What do you know about Philemon Bond?" he demanded.

"More than you want told!" Arad promptly retorted.

"You say he is dead. How do you know?"

"Ain't he?"

"Not to my knowledge; but you may be able to give me points on the subject. It has occurred to me he may not have gone out of sight of his own free will, and I also remember you do not bear the best of reputations. You may know the whole story, Mr. Huse!"

"Oh, you can't shake off the responsibility that way, old man. You know, an' so do I, that the mystery of his goin' lays nigher this house, an' its master, than has been told in public. D'ye see that?"

He flourished the knife before Leland's eyes.

"I see it; yes. What of it?"

Ruth began to take courage. Her brother was far cooler than she had dared to hope. There might yet be safety for them.

"You killed Bond with it!" declared Arad, coming to the point with startling directness.

Again Leland showed remarkable composure.

"Are you drunk or insane?"

"I ain't either; but I'll tell ye what I be. I'm in possession o' your secret, an' you don't want ter abuse me. It'll only make it all the harder fer you, an' ef you get my mad up, you won't find me a friend as I be now. You want more light, do ye? Wal, hark ter me!"

The miner grew more impressive. He felt that the whole case was in his own hands, and he lifted his powerful form up with the dignity of a master. Giving them no chance to interrupt, he went on:

"Old Bond disappeared from here in a mysterious way. Some folks hev wondered how, but it was left fer me to find out.

"Wanderin' among the hills I found a dead man in a gully. I looked ter him closer an' found that he had been murdered. There was a knife-wound in his back, an' I would have been a dunce not to understand that. It told plain of violence an' crime.

"I searched an' found by him this knife. It is your knife, Leland Sherwin; I don't think you will deny that.

"I could not tell by the man's face who he had been, but his clothes did tell a clear story. They were Philemon Bond's.

"Now, somebody murdered the feller. Who was it? Whose knife was found by the body? What would folks say ef I produced the knife an' made my story public?

"I reckon you don't want me ter do that, Mr. Sherwin!"

The miner ceased and awaited the reply. His manner was confident; it was clear he did not anticipate any failure.

All this while Ruth had been watching her brother. On the previous occasion Arad had humbled and silenced her. How would Leland meet the charge? She was pleased to see that he was outwardly firm.

His reply was steady and cool:

"Mr. Huse, your reputation never has been of the best in Shadow Shaft, but I never suspected you of being deficient in common sense. You go down in my estimation a good deal when you make a charge you can not prove—"

"But I can prove it!" Arad cried.

"You say Bond is dead. What proof have you of your assertion?"

"Go with me and I will show you the body!" declared Arad.

"Where is it?"

"Out in the hills, to the north."

"Do you think you can find it again?"

"Why, of course; I buried it. I reckon it won't git up an' walk away, fer."

"And you will take me there?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"At once."

"I'll go immediately after dinner. Prove what you assert, and I'll deal with you."

"You know what my terms are?"

"What?"

"I demand her for my wife!"

Arad pointed to Ruth, and his eyes glowed with excitement.

"We'll talk of that later."

"I want to talk now; I want you ter promise—"

"I refuse to promise anything until you have proven what you claim. You will have to excuse me for being skeptical until this is done. When you prove all you assert we can talk business, but I never buy a pig in a poke."

Arad rubbed his chin and meditated. He did not like Leland's manner. He had thought to see the banker overwhelmed with fear and consternation. He was not in that frame of mind, as far as Arad could see, and the miner began to ask himself if he had made a mistake.

Would Sherwin be so cool if he was guilty?

"Where do we meet?"

"Wal," sullenly answered Arad, "I s'pose it may as well be jest outside the town; say at the dead pine. I'll be there at two o'clock."

"So will I. Of course," Leland added, with the first visible sign of anxiety, "you will come alone?"

"Sartain."

"I'll meet you."

The visitor hesitated. The interview seemed to be over, but he did not feel like going away.

"I want fair play in this," he went on. "I'm a square man, myself, an' not given ter mean tricks. I expect you ter deal on the same principle. Ef you don't, I'll make you sweat fer it. I know I ain't a big-bug, but I'm honest, an' I want ter be used wal. Ef I ain't, look out. I'm bad when I'm sot on!"

"Rest easy, Mr. Huse; you shall have no ground for complaint. We must trust each other, and I think I may say we are equally sincere. I certainly don't want to get into trouble, so you can depend upon me."

Arad did not seem wholly convinced, but he did not at that moment see any way to better his position. He decided to trust to luck and act a mild part if it would enable him to carry his point. He said a few more words, more or less appropriate, and then took himself out of sight. Ruth breathed a sigh of relief, but regarded Leland anxiously.

Somewhat to her surprise, he looked more cheerful than he had done in many days past. He meditated deeply for several minutes; then suddenly turned to Ruth.

"Poor child!" he exclaimed, "this scoundrel must have frightened you beyond expression. I hope you are getting over it?"

"Don't think of me. But what of you?"

"Of me?"

"His charge—"

"Either a bluff or a foolish step on his part. If he has no dead man to show me, his story falls through at once. If he has such a relic of humanity, he will get himself into trouble by digging it up. I shall have him arrested at once, and the mystery of Philemon Bond's disappearance will be in a fair way of being solved immediately. It is said the hider can find; Arad may have trouble in explaining how he came to know that Bond was buried there!"

Leland laughed as he spoke these words. Ruth experienced considerable relief, for it was pleasant to see him more like his old self, but under all was a sense of dissatisfaction.

Bond had been a friend of their family, or had passed as such. Why did Leland take a rumor of his death so calmly—why did he laugh, instead of expressing sorrow at Philemon's untimely end?

"Won't he deny all, when accused?" she asked, referring to Arad.

"I shall at once inform some of the leading citizens, and have witnesses at hand. If Arad digs up any body he will have opportunity then and there to explain what he can about it, and how he knew of the man being buried there."

Ruth's face brightened. She did not fail to see that it would place Arad in a very serious position, and light seemed to be breaking on the scene.

"What did he say to you?" Sherwin suddenly added.

"He declared you had killed Mr. Bond."

"Absurd! Why should I kill him?"

It was hardly a question in the usual sense of the word, for it was not a call for information. He seemed, rather, to dispose of the whole case as one too ridiculous to be entertained.

Ruth, however, remembered the statement of the miner that Leland had stolen from the Consolidated Banking Company, and removed Bond so he could not reveal the fact. The truth is often spoken unawares. When Arad made that claim, he did not have the least cause for believing any part of it was true. He had caught at something which would awe and frighten Ruth, believing she would not tell her brother; and by chance he had come far nearer the truth than Leland would have been pleased to have any one get.

Now, Ruth lacked the courage to tell Sherwin of this other charge, and it was not mentioned.

The banker was in high spirits, very much to the surprise of all who noticed him, and in due time he went out to select and secure his witnesses for the afternoon. Left alone, Ruth went over the whole matter again and grew frightened.

Was there anything in the claim of the miner that Sherwin & Fearing had become embarrassed in their business affairs; that Bond had discovered the fact? If it was false, why had Leland seemed so gay after he heard Bond was dead?

"There is something back of all this!" Ruth could not but decide. "What is it? I am frightened at my own thoughts!"

She hoped Leland would have more to say when he came in, but he did not refer to the matter as one demanding more careful consideration. He gave the impression that he had only to seize Arad and it would be all over.

The latter's charge that he had done Bond to death was ignored.

In due time Leland left the house and walked toward the place appointed for the meeting with Arad. The miner was there, and after a little talk they kept on toward the alleged place of burial.

Arad was no fool, and he did not like Leland's manner. The banker did not succeed in disguising his state of mind as well as was advisable, and the fact did not escape Arad's notice. Still, he could not see the truth, and did not suspect the counter-stroke under consideration.

They reached the vicinity where Gabe Gall had seen Arad act as grave-digger, and the miner fell to work.

Unknown to him there were several pairs of eyes watching his movements. Those invited by Leland had followed from Shadow Shaft, and were now near enough to see all.

As on the former occasion Huse had brought a board for a spade, and with this he began to dig vigorously.

CHAPTER XXV.

OPENING THE GRAVE.

THE light sand yielded readily to the touch, and it was not long before Arad struck something not sand.

"Here we have it!" he flippantly announced. "Look yer purtiest ter see the dead rise!"

Sherwin made a secret motion, and his allies drew nearer. The rocks enabled them to get within sound of the two chief actors' voices, which they proceeded to do.

The object touched by the board did not prove to be more than a fragment of wood, and Arad cast it aside and went on with his work. He dug until the hole was large, but nothing was developed.

He paused and looked around with doubt expressed on his face. Had he got the wrong place? No; that was impossible; he certainly had made no error in that way, yet he did not see the body. Already he seemed to have gone deeper than when he dug the grave, and with no result.

He resumed with something like fear. Had somebody baffled him after all? He was soon so low that he knew by the increasing solidity of the earth that it had not been disturbed, before. Again he paused, and this time he wiped the perspiration away from his forehead in a way not indicative of a mind at ease.

"You bury your dead deep," remarked Leland, with some sarcasm.

"I reckon I got a few feet too far to the east," returned the miner. "I'll dig hyer."

He dug, but with no better result than before. Then he still further enlarged his field of operations, but made no greater success than at first. The fact became clear that he was baffled; the body was no longer there.

As this dawned upon him in its full force he ceased work and looked at Leland almost piteously.

"Do you know about this?" he asked.

"About what?"

"Thar ain't no body hyer, now."

"Well, you advertised to produce a dead man."

"Hev you took him away?"

"Decidedly not! I did not know where it was; you are the producer of the occasion."

The two regarded each other in mutual disappointment. Arad saw he could not hope to maintain his point unless he could give the evidence, while Sherwin had a very lively fear. If Philemon Bond was not dead he was not free from danger of prosecution for his illegal use of the Consolidated Banking Company's funds, and he expected accusations from Arad which he had no means of meeting. He wished, then, his own allies were far away. But no; they were near enough to hear whatever Huse might say, and what they heard they were liable to ponder over.

"The grave has been robbed!" declared Arad.

"By whom?"

"That's the question. Who did it?"

"You have not been secret enough."

"Durn it!" Arad cried, with sudden suspicion,

"I know how to account fer it. Nobody knew of this but you, an' et was you who did it! You think ter beat me out by gettin' the body out o' sight, but it won't work. I may not be able ter show the body fer evidence—I can't, when you've stole it—but the facts o' the case remain. You killed Philemon Bond!"

Leland was startled.

"You talk nonsense!" he declared. "Don't let me hear any more of it. You have failed to prove what you assert—"

"Yes; because you stole the body—"

"I have done nothing of the kind, and I don't believe there has been any body here. Confess your falsehood and—"

"Durn ye! call me a liar, will ye? Wal, do it ef you dare! I'm goin' straight ter town an' show the knife I found by the body—your knife—an' I rather reckon you won't be soglib as you be now. Yes, sirree; it was your knife I found by it, an' I want you ter explain how it got there. Yes; an' I want you ter explain why you stole the money of the Consolidated Banking Company, an' got Bond so hot at you he was goin' ter hev you pulled up for theft!"

Several times Leland had tried to interrupt,

but Arad raised his voice and almost shouted the words, and there was no such thing as outwinding him.

The charge of dishonesty in connection with the Banking Company was made simply in ill-will, and without any notion how near he was getting to the truth.

Sherwin was in perspiration. He could see his friends in ambush, but wished them miles away. Then the crisis came when they emerged from cover and advanced, as they believed, to help him.

Arad saw them and grew silent, but one of the party, a prominent business man, confronted him aggressively.

"See here, Huse, you want to go a bit slow in this!" he cautioned. "We are dead onto you!"

"On ter me fer what?"

"You know too much about Philemon Bond's disappearance for an honest man. We will trouble you to explain how you knew where he was buried, and some other things about the matter."

"What business is it o' yours?" growled the miner.

"We are here as friends of Leland Sherwin, and, having overheard all, I take the liberty of putting you under arrest for the murder of Philemon Bond!"

Arad stared dumbly, while Leland would have given a good deal if the officious business man had been well out of the way. Suddenly Arad's face flushed.

"So this is a plot ag'in' me!" he exclaimed. "Lele Sherwin was too big a coward ter fight it out on the square, an' he put up a job ter do me up! Wal, let him try it; I'm ready for the fight!"

Leland was not, and he hastily interposed:

"I think you are two hasty, Gregg. There is no proof that Huse has done harm to Bond, or that he has done more than to try and bulldoze me."

"Would he, could he, do that without some good ground for it? The fact that he failed to find the body is not enough. He expected to find it. I say he had a reason!"

"So I did!" shouted Arad, not seeing that he had Leland frightened and willing to help him out; "I had a reason, an' I kin tell you what. Just you look inter the affairs of Sherwin & Fearing. Find out how they stand in money matters, an' how their accounts are with their employers. Ef you don't see much then, look further an' guess why old Phil Bond went out o' sight so sudden. He went ter sleep in Sherwin's house, an' then disappeared from sight so quick you couldn't say 'Jack Robinson' before he was gone. Who had a motive fer gettin' him out o' the way? Did you? Did I? Who did?"

Arad had developed much oratorical ability, and at this stage of affairs he leveled his index finger at Leland and came to a suggestive pause.

Every one there was disposed to think well of him and disregard whatever might be said by Arad, but eyes were turned upon Leland with questioning gravity. Rude as the miner was, he had made his mark.

Sherwin did his best to keep cool, outwardly.

"You have had your say," he remarked, "and I suppose you are happy. I will not argue with you. I'll let the gentlemen here decide on the merits of the case."

"Yes; an' let them consult your books fer the merits!"

For one who was shooting at random Arad was remarkably accurate. He sought only to abuse, but he worried his opponent to the extreme.

"Sherwin & Fearing can do business with their employers without our help," remarked a loyal friend of the senior partner. "I think we have indulged in enough cheap talk. The question is, what are we going to do with Mr. Huse?"

"Arrest him," suggested one man.

"Whar's yer evidence?" shouted Arad.

Each of the party waited for some one else to speak. The question was timely. Where was their evidence? Huse had claimed there was a dead body in the hole he had just dug, but none had been developed. It was no offense to make such a claim, whether it was true or not. He had denied having done any criminal act. Upon what charge could they arrest him?

"Blackmail!" finally suggested a merchant. "He tried to get money out of Mr. Sherwin. We never have tried a case of the kind in this town, but we want a precedent."

"Never mind!" hurriedly advised Leland. "I think Huse has had a lesson. Let us temper justice with mercy. Let him go, friends; I don't care to prosecute."

"Let me go!" defiantly retorted Arad, "and I'll go straight ter the Consolidated Bankin' Company an' tell all I know!"

One of the witnesses shook his head.

"An idle threat, of course, but it shows the mood the man is in. Gentlemen, we shall fail in our duty if we do not lock him up for blackmail!"

The idea met with approval from all but Leland, and it was thus decided. Arad was in a rage, but he had too many to contend with for him to defy the whole crowd. For a few moments, indeed, he thought seriously of resisting with knife and revolver, but there were men

present who, despite the fact that they belonged to the best society in Shadow Shaft, had a reputation for shooting straight and quick, themselves, and he changed his mind.

Sullenly he submitted to be considered a prisoner.

Some one advised an immediate return to the town, but others saw that an investigation ought to precede it. Arad was asked to tell what he knew about the alleged dead man, and he finally did so.

He explained how, according to his claim, he had been wandering in that vicinity without any especial object when he came upon the body. He had recognized it as that of Philemon Bond, and had found upon it a knife which he knew was Leland Sherwin's. He had buried the remains and then gone to the banker about it, as they already knew.

"Why did you keep it secret?" asked the merchant.

"'Twas Sherwin's friend, an' I went ter him," sulkily answered Arad.

"Why did you bury it?"

"Wild animals might hev eat it up."

"Why didn't you go to Sherwin as soon as you found the body? Why were you so long in getting to business?"

Arad moved uneasily.

"You evidently wanted to conceal the matter."

"Durn it all!" the miner burst forth. "I went ter Ruth Sherwin at the start. Old Bond was nothin' ter me, an' I didn't care what become o' him, but I knew Lele had done him ter death, an' I was willin' ter keep the secret ef Ruth would think kind o' me. I never asked Lele fer no money; thar ain't no blackmail about it, an' nobody kin say thar was, but I stand by them who are willin' ter stand by me. Ef the Sherwins had been that way, thar would hev been no tellin' on this, but they elect ter jump on me. Now, you go ahead an' see who'll get the worst of it. Investigate, an' see who had a motive fer killin' Phil Bond!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

DORCAS SPEAKS.

ARAD had made out something of a case, and in such affairs there is always some one, at least, who is influenced. On this occasion no one rose to take Arad's part, but his words had been sown. Something might come of it.

Those who were not disposed to favor him blindly, insinuated that money was the cause of most of the crimes of the world, and that some men would rob their fellow-beings for a small sum, but as the miner was not then on trial, nobody cared to dwell upon the possibility that Bond had been thus slain by the ill-favored rock-dweller.

Huse, himself, began to think he might have made a mistake in attacking a man who did not seem disposed to wage active war against him, so he relapsed into sullen silence.

After he had declared he had no means of locating the body, the return to the town was begun and made without incident.

There was a sensation in Shadow Shaft soon after their arrival. News spread fast, and the events of the day were soon known by all in a more or less correct form.

Although there was no proof that Philemon Bond was dead, it was generally believed he was, and people were discussing the evidence presented by the two phases of the case. Had he been killed by Arad Huse or Leland Sherwin?

As the bulk of sympathy went with Leland, so the majority of the citizens scouted the idea that he was guilty. Arad stood lower than ever in public opinion, which was saying a good deal.

Yet, the best of men have their enemies, and those who did not like Sherwin did not fail to make insinuations which were liable to bear fruit at some inconvenient season.

Leland did not succeed in getting home for supper until a late hour. When he did arrive he had to eat alone, but Ruth, who had heard the reports, was there to ask for his own story and to comfort him.

What he had to say did not amount to much. True, he had to make many words in the conversation, but the amount of it all might have been boiled down to this—he denied having ever done any harm to Philemon Bond, or having been party to his disappearance.

And Ruth believed him. That was a foregone fact.

He was weary, troubled and about discouraged, if the truth was but known, and correspondingly anxious to get to bed and out of the sight of all; but it was not to be without further encounter.

To him came Dorcas Huse, looking pale and nervous.

"I would like to talk with you, Mr. Sherwin!" she said.

Leland had expected it. He could not expect less. Arad was her son, and he knew she had a mother's affection for the worthless loafer. He resigned himself to the fresh ordeal with what composure he could summon.

"Well, Mrs. Huse?"

Her eyes shimmered brightly.

"I hear you have accused my boy!" she began, in a voice almost inaudible.

"You are wrong, Mrs. Huse; I have not accused him, or any one else," Leland responded, patiently.

"Isn't he in jail under an awful charge?"

"I did not put him there. On the contrary, I advised against it, as he will tell you, I am sure, if you ask him about it. I wanted no such work."

"Anyhow, you brought him to it."

"You are wrong again. I did not bring him to it."

"Didn't you invite the men there to overhear the interview between him and yourself?"

"Yes, but no one had accused him, then, nor did I know he was to be accused. I was the one thus branded, and it was he who did it. I was simply trying to protect myself; no more."

"That does not alter the fact that my boy is in jail."

"It alters the alleged fact that I put him there. I repeat, I advised against it, and he was arrested against my wishes."

"Were you afraid to have the matter brought to public notice?"

"Afraid?"

"Yes."

"Why should I be?"

"You ought to know best."

"Mrs. Huse, it seems to me you are hard to please. You accuse me of putting him in jail, and then insinuate I was afraid to have him put there."

Dorcas was not her old calm self. Her eyes were startlingly bright, and she looked like a cat about to spring on its prey. He had never mistaken her for an angel, but that moment was a new revelation to him. He began to see she might be as dangerous as her burly sons.

"It looks to me," she exclaimed, "as if some one had laid a plan to make Arad a victim!"

"Surely, you don't think that of me, Mrs. Huse?"

"I desired you to help me think who it could be—who would have a motive for doing it."

"Assuredly, no one. The men who finally insisted upon his arrest had nothing to gain or lose by it, for they were not in any way concerned in it. As for me, I would gladly have kept him from the lock-up."

"He is there. What next?"

"The charge against him is blackmailing me. You are my housekeeper; he is your son. For that reason, I will go to the jail to-morrow and ask for his release."

"But men are saying he killed Philemon Bond. You know that isn't true."

"There is no evidence showing that Bond is dead except Arad's own claim. Let him retract that, and I fancy there will be no trouble getting him out of prison."

"Oh! you want him to take it back!" cried Dorcas.

Leland sighed.

"You try my patience," he confessed. "Personally, I don't care what he says about it, but it occurs to me that, if he should say that, there would be no evidence upon which to hold him."

Mrs. Huse thrust her head so far forward that her eyes seemed like glittering stars.

"Do you think Bond is dead?" she demanded.

"I doubt it."

"Where is he, then?"

"I don't know."

"Have you forgotten what happened the night he went out of sight?"

"What did happen?"

"You remember what Dick heard. His room is the nearest to that which Bond had. He overheard sounds in the other room, that night; he overheard men moving there who did not seem to be on good terms."

"He heard a sound like a groan, and when he went to investigate it, and asked if anything was wrong, a voice exclaimed: 'Go to bed, fool!' He thought there was the sound of a struggle there, and all things went to prove there must have been."

"Now, did he not say promptly that the voice which bade him go to bed was like yours?"

Quiet Dorcas was, in one sense of the word, but she was dramatic in that way, and it was clear that a storm was brewing. Leland would have been blind not to see this. As coolly as possible he replied:

"I told you all, then, that I had not been in the room which Bond occupied, nor did I know of the events he mentioned."

"Would you confess it?"

"Why shouldn't I, if the events were true?"

"Because you might not dare to!"

Sherwin's face flushed.

"I should be blind not to see what you mean, Mrs. Huse, but you do me great injustice. I have no knowledge of the matters you refer to, and if Mr. Bond met with any mishap I am not aware of the fact. At no time have I shown a disposition to accuse you or your son, and if he has got into trouble, it is not my fault."

"As usual, it is the war of the rich on the poor!"

"As usual, the war of the rich on the poor exists only in the feverish fancy of the poor," replied Leland, patiently. "Far be it from me to make any one a scapegoat for me. I will bear my own sins if I must, but I do not ask any one

to bear them for me. I do not ask this of Arad Huse."

This generalism did not seem to interest Dorcas, and she gave it no visible attention.

"Who killed Philemon Bond?" she suddenly demanded.

"I know not that he is dead."

"Did not Arad see the body in the hills?"

"He says he did. He may have been in error."

"Who was in the agent's room when Dick heard them if it was not you? Whose voice did he hear if it was not yours?"

"My dear woman, I can tell you no more about this than I have done already. How Philemon Bond went away, or whether he went in health and prosperity or otherwise, I do not know. I have done him no harm, nor have I knowingly done that which has brought any one else under suspicion. I swear to that!"

Leland felt that it would be folly to talk any further, and he arose as if to depart. Dorcas gave no signs of being through.

"My boy is in prison," she pertinaciously declared, "and he is not guilty of the crimes charged to him. Some one must save him. I am only a woman, but I will not stand idle and see him suffer. Sir, you give me food and drink in return for my services, but were I at the point of starvation I would not remain silent now if you offered me a thousand dollars. Unless Arad is released, I shall tell every one what has been seen and heard in this house; I shall tell all, Mr. Sherwin!"

"That rests with you to decide," replied the banker, impatiently, at last. "I will see that Arad is given justice as far as I can see. Beyond that I can promise nothing. I advise you to wait and learn more before being rash or precipitate. If you think my advice an injury, you will have to do as you think proper. Good-night!"

Without pausing to hear any reply, he left the room and walked quickly to his own chamber.

The day had been one of trial to him such as none could realize except those similarly placed. From the time Arad came to him he had been almost constantly under observation, and it had been a constant struggle to keep his composure. Iron-nerved, indeed, must have been he who would not have been all the time on the verge of a break-down.

Once more alone, he threw himself on the bed, and, covering his eyes, tried to think calmly.

Calmly? He might as well have attempted to pull down the house by the power of his single arm. There could be no more of peace for him until some change for the better had come. And that change—would it ever come?

He went over all the matter, and then reached one decision, if not another:

"This is the natural drift of crime. We—fearing and myself—appropriated the money of our employers to speculate with. We thought then we could soon return it. So thinks every thief of our stripe. As usual, our crime did not reward us. We got into a deep hole. Then came Philemon Bond. My first impulse was to tell him all as soon as he came. I decided to defer action as long as possible. Whether this was wise, or the reverse, I may never know."

"Then he disappeared. How? Why? By whose help? These are questions of vital importance."

"There will be a sensation now, and, at the very least, I shall be blamed for waiting so long before trying to find what became of him. Will the fire be so hot that I shall fall under it?"

Thus ran the banker's thoughts, and when he finally succumbed to weariness and fell asleep, his dreams were haunted by wild fancies and fears.

When he awoke he was not surprised to hear that Lute Huse was waiting to see him, nor did he need to be told the business the miner had in hand. Whether he had come partially on his own accord or not, it was plain he had seen Dorcas. Her views were visible in all the prisoner's brother had to say.

"We depend on you to save Arad!" declared Lute, "an' ef you don't do it, it's a fight between us an' you. Arad is innocent, an' we won't stand no monkey work. You hear me?"

Lute was even more offensive than Arad in his way. Alike as the brothers were, Lute was the blunter of the two, and he was now simply commanding and ugly.

Leland waxed indignant.

"Arad will be released if judged innocent, and not otherwise!" he warmly declared.

"Ef he ain't released, you'll go ter prison with him!" cried Lute.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HEMMED IN BY DANGER.

LUTE had said his say, and he turned on his heel and walked out of the room and the house. Sherwin watched him go with an expression as if he was suffering bodily pain. Then Ruth came into the room with quick, light footsteps. She came to her brother's side and put her arm around his neck.

"My poor Leland!" she murmured.

He tried to be composed.

"Why 'poor' Leland?"

"Dorcas has told me all—all of the unjust demand upon you; the vile insinuation."

"All!" he muttered.

"Yet I am not convinced. I am sure—yes, I know you are innocent! I would not believe otherwise under any condition. Trust me, brother, for I know you too well to doubt!"

"Ruth," he replied, "your words come at an hour when they are especially dear to me. Accusation is not proof, and I expect to rout these people, let them say what they will, but your kindness is none the less appreciated. I thank you for it!"

She could not know all that was in the tremor in his voice; she could not know he was thinking that even if he was cleared completely of any harm done to Bond, the affair remained of which he was guilty: the misappropriation of the Banking Company's money.

"You must have a lawyer," she suggested, anon.

"No, no; that would be almost a confession of guilt. I want no defender, for I prefer to trust in my innocence. Don't get an over-estimate of this matter, Ruth; there is not the least danger. Still, I fully appreciate all you say in sympathy."

"Of course it will all come out right," she loyally went on. "All know you and your character—your unswerving honor."

Leland winced. The last words cut him more than he was willing to admit. What would she say when his "honor" had been made clear to all!

Ruth went her way, but after her came Gabe Gall.

"Hallo, old man!" was his airy greeting. "Want to hire a lawyer? I hear you accused of all sorts of crime on the streets. Can I get the job of piloting you through the breakers?"

Sherwin regarded the Gambolier sharply. This man he had suspected of being a detective, and if he was that, he was the most dangerous person in Shadow Shaft.

"You seem interested?" he remarked.

"I am," agreed Gabe, smilingly.

"Why?"

"Because I am a welcome guest under your roof."

"And a guest should never strike at his host?" pointedly asked the banker.

"He should take an interest in the affairs of his host, and be so well posted as to require nothing at a time of danger to enable him to jump in and act with wisdom and good judgment."

"Are you posted on me to that degree?"

"No, but you can soon put me in that way."

Sherwin leaned forward and looked closely at his companion. The feeling came over him at that moment that it was utterly useless to resist fate, and that he might as well be reconciled to the inevitable. Feeling thus, Gabe Gall began to have a fascination for him. Whatever else he was, the man from Great Hump was not like Leland's other foes. Audacious he might be and was, but he had a degree of intelligence which was to be appreciated.

"Would you advise me to make you my confidant?" Leland deliberately asked.

"I would."

"What would be the result?"

"Why, I should be a high-roller in this matter!"

"And what should I gain by it?"

"I may over-rate myself," modestly returned the Gambolier, "but I should say it would be an honor to you to have such a chap in your confidence!"

"Man, why did you come to Shadow Shaft?"

"Frankly, to make arrangements to establish a mission school. I was sent as advance agent, with the promise that if I found enough sinners to make it necessary, I was to report to that effect and they would put up the mission at once. There is no doubt of its being erected."

"You are as glib and wordy as usual, but I must repeat my question. Why are you here? Why have I been made your especial study? What are you trying to do? And is your work about done?"

"Further than the mission," carelessly answered Gabe, "I have but one discovery to report. I'm not a searcher for 'specimens,' like our genial friend Dreamer Dick, but I have chanced upon some things which interest me, and may not be of infinitesimal moment to you. Here is one of them!"

He thrust his hand into his pocket, and brought it out claspings a revolver. This he laid before Leland and smiled his most happy-go-lucky smile.

"A toy of exquisite finish," he added, carelessly.

It was an open question if his interest in the way it was received was so commonplace as it purported. He had a way of looking into one's face as he made his comments which put every expression of the other person as clearly before his eyes as if he assumed a severe and attentive air. Now, he had Leland under close watch. If, however, he expected to see signs of guilt, he was very much disappointed. Leland promptly reached out and took the revolver up.

"Why, this is my weapon!" he confessed, unhesitatingly.

"Are you sure?"

"I think I am. I am not a shooter, but unless this is just like mine, it is the one I owned. The resemblance is close, anyhow."

He showed no signs of guilt or embarrassment.

"The one you lost, you mean?"

"Yes; I had no other."

"And this is the one you put away on the shelf, or some place in your parlor, and it disappeared?" Gabe went on.

"Yes."

There was a moment's silence; then the banker turned to his companion, again, and added:

"Where did you get it?"

"Close by where Arad says he found your knife and the body of Philemon Bond!" promptly answered the Gambolier.

Sherwin's eyes dilated.

"By heaven! there is an organized plot against me!" he exclaimed.

"Who should plot against you?"

"I don't know, but this matter is not all chance. Chance can only go so far. I see, now, that some one is aiming to destroy me. Found it near where Arad says he found the knife and the body of Philemon Bond? Tell me more—more! Tell me all!"

Leland leaned forward with an appearance of excitement, and seemed eager to tear the secret from the Gambolier.

"If any one is plotting against you, it must be some one who has cause to hate you. Have you such an enemy?" asked Gabe, avoiding the other's question.

"I can point to no such person, but who knows what vile wretch is seeking his life-blood, as I may say, even in his most peaceful moments? There is a plot against me!"

No proof was advanced, and Mr. Gall looked skeptical.

"Tell me where and how you found the revolver," added Leland, presently.

"I was one day wandering in that region, and in poking among the rocks for odd recesses I chanced to find a package in a niche. I pulled it out, and this revolver was in my hands. I had no means of knowing whose it was, of course, so I simply held on to it. Now, you say it is yours, which settles it; but it's odd how it got in that niche so close to where Arad says he found the body and the knife!"

The Gambolier hung to his association of ideas and indulged in repetition until the suspicion might well have been awakened that he was trying to work upon his companion's fears, but Leland did not give any evidence of having been impressed by this fact.

Still more emphatically he responded:

"All this goes to prove there is a conspiracy against me. Think of it! Suppose I were guilty of doing harm to Bond? Would I parade all the proofs of the crime where they could be found? No; the real criminal has overreached himself. His trap is too transparent: he parades the victim—myself—too ostentatiously!"

The banker spoke with energy from first to last, and Gabe did not interrupt.

Perhaps he was willing an accused person should talk to the extent of his ability.

Leland paused, meditated, and then added in a different tone:

"You seem interested, Mr. Gall."

"I am; you're my host," serenely answered Gabe.

"Is that all?"

"Oh! my friendship—"

"Wait! When you came to Shadow Shaft you forced yourself upon my notice; you wrested hospitality from me by force. Do you claim you are now actuated solely by good will for me?"

"That's it, old man!"

"You may as well drop the pretense. Matters have reached a point where trick and falsehood are not necessary. Out with the truth, sir! Who and what are you? Why are you at this town? What are you trying to do? Is it your purpose to ruin me? If it is, out with the truth like a man!"

One who had followed the course of events and observed the weak and vacillating policy of the banker in the past might well have wondered, now, whence came his sudden flow of courage, and there did seem no good reason for it, but if he really was ambitious to face the worst at once he was not obliged by Gabe Gall.

Blandly that gentleman exclaimed.

"Bless me, Lele, what tangent are you flying off at? I don't understand you in the least. Your questions have just fallen as freely as rain in summer, but I'll abridge my reply. You know all about me; I have been perfectly frank from the time I first struck town, and I have no ax to grind but what I carry visible to the whole world."

"I don't believe you!"

"No?"

"I do not!"

"This is the first time anybody ever doubted my word. It comes a bit hard on an honest fellow!" and Gabe looked sincerely grieved.

"You may be as honest as the hills of the mountain chain, but I do not for a moment credit your other claims. Why did you come to Shadow Shaft? Speak out; you will find no

better time than now. I am ready to listen, and I want it over with. Speak out!"

"Do you take me for a man-eater?"

"I take you for a man-hunter! I trust you are not a sneaking one, either. Fight fair! Come, what is it? Speak out!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HARDEST BLOW OF ALL.

GABE GALL smiled into Leland's face in the old way.

"Well, well, well!" he laughed, "I may be taken for the czar, next. Honors fly thick, it seems, in these days. You are all wrong, though, in attributing such qualities to me. I am not the man you think me; I am no devouring monster. Seriously, Lele, I am one who may be able to help you, if you only let me."

"How?" Sherwin asked.

"I have spoken of the reports on the streets."

"Lies, you mean!"

"Perhaps, but I know nothing harder to down than a healthy lie. Men do not speak of you with that respect which your name was wont to arouse. These latest developments have shaken their faith somewhat. Now, shall I help you?"

"How?"

"By taking up your case and fighting for you—acting as your attorney, as it were. Give means of refuting the evidence of the knife; of the dead body; of the unpleasant references to Bond's sudden vanishment from your house. Other things may occur to you, too."

"Much does occur to me, and all points to one thing; every suspicion brings you up to my mind, sir!"

"You tend to weary me!"

With some show of annoyance Gabe rose and moved toward the door.

"We can't treat under such befuddled circumstances," he decided. "If, however, you ever want my help, come to me."

"Are you sure," Leland asked, "that it would be safe help?"

"You are my host."

"I notice you promise nothing!"

Gabe came back swiftly. His voice was not so careless as usual as he quickly added:

"Go out and listen to the voices of the street. You have been a great man, here, but my experience goes to show that the public is always ready to jump on its idols, and you never were more than an esteemed business man and financier. One like that can not hope to be adored when he is on the downward road. Listen to the voices of the street and see if you do not think you ought to have a good man to tie to. If you do, I am here!"

Once more Gabe turned, and this time he went out with quick steps. It was clear he had said his say and was willing to leave Leland to think the problem out.

The chance was not neglected, though Sherwin had previously thought until his head seemed bursting. Now, he arose and paced the room with slow and heavy steps and gloomy brow. He was thus engaged when John Brown appeared at the door and announced:

"Mr. Sheriff Green!"

The gentleman named came in promptly, almost as if he had been in doubt of being admitted if he gave Leland chance to refuse.

He was a big, muscular, honest man who stood well in Shadow Shaft, but had rarely had occasion to come there, his headquarters being at Rooster Run.

He now nodded in a short and jerky way.

"How are you, Sherwin? I've called professionally."

The official's manner was not the same he had shown on past occasions when he had called at the office to consult about law-breakers, and Leland was not slow to infer that there was something unpleasant afoot. He met the sheriff's gaze steadily, however.

"I am glad to see you, as usual. What brings you here?"

"Confounded unpleasant business. I was sent for about the charge that Philemon Bond was dead—"

"Who sent for you?"

"It was an anonymous call, but I will bet my boots it came from a woman under your roof. I had seen writing like it before. I think if you were to whisper Dorcas Huse's name you would not get far from the truth. How is that?"

"Why should she send for you?"

"That's what I am going to ask her. She may not have been the one—whoever was, disguised her work so that I can't swear to it, I admit. But the call is not much to what I have been told since my arrival."

"What have you been told?" coolly inquired Leland.

"Major Ward Fearing has made a statement."

"Of what?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No!"

Sherwin was steady in his denial, and Green moved uneasily in his seat.

"Well, you are interested, anyhow, and ought to know as much about it as he. He purports to tell just how Bond disappeared."

"If he knows this, why has he been so long in telling it?"

"His explanation answers that. Also, his explanation seems to put you in an unpleasant situation."

"Why?"

"When I arrived at Shadow Shaft I went first to the office of Sherwin & Fearing. You were not there, but Fearing was. I told him why I was here, and then he at once declared he had a statement to make. He made it, and I must say I was astonished!"

"Well?"

Leland leaned forward as he asked the brief question, as if he would draw it from the sheriff before the latter could speak. His face had grown pale, and it was clear he was deeply moved.

"Well," gravely went on the officer, "this was the story he told: He declared that for some time Sherwin & Fearing had been financially embarrassed. He asserted that the firm had misappropriated money to speculate with, and had lost it all—money that had belonged to the Consolidated Banking Company!"

Leland leaned back again and looked Green boldly in the face, thinking.

"It has come! Fearing has weakened and confessed all. What more is known? It matters not; the ruin has come and I have no longer a secret to hide. I have only to meet my fate. I will meet it manfully!"

"Of course this story is believed, sir?"

"It must be taken notice of, Mr. Sherwin."

"Quite correct, sir. Proceed!"

"Your partner declares that a crisis arrived when Philemon Bond came on a short time ago, to make his periodical investigation of your branch of the Consolidated."

"Naturally, it would," agreed Leland, with the calm interest of an outsider.

"He says Bond was not notified of the state of affairs, and that the agent went to bed here in your house in supreme unconsciousness of the volcano muttering in the town. Then, Fearing says, you came to him and proposed that the agent be removed so you could have time to try and make good the amount you had misappropriated. Did you catch a suggestive word?"

"What was it?"

"Removed!"

"An ugly word, truly," Leland returned, with casual interest manifested.

"And he says you asked him to share in the operation of removal."

"Of course he refused?"

"So he says."

"And then?"

"Then you said Bond should never live to ruin you, and went away. Fearing saw you no more that night, and when the day came Bond was gone. He has not since been seen in the flesh, if at all."

"I should rather hear Ward Fearing say this than to take the word of the best man in America, sir."

"Come with me and you shall hear all you ask. He will define the meaning of the word 'removed!'"

"I will go with you."

The banker made ready in a composed manner. He believed, then, that Fearing had determined to save himself at all hazards, and had lied without remorse—for whatever Leland's shortcomings were, he had never had the conversation with Fearing which was charged against him. He had not asked the junior partner to help him "remove" the now-missing agent.

Sherwin and Green walked to the office side by side, and with as much composure as usual. Leland tried to act naturally in all ways, and not exhibit interest in those they met by the way, but he could not avoid stealing glances of inquiry. The result was that he decided the fresh charges against him were already public.

In the office they found Fearing and several men of the town.

Several persons bowed formally, but Leland did not heed it. He had eyes only for Major Fearing. He met no responsive regard; the accuser stared at the floor and did not have courage to face his partner.

The new-comers sat down.

"To avoid unnecessary talk," remarked Green, "I will say I have told Mr. Sherwin all. The rest of you can now question anybody, or to whatever end you choose."

"We should hear Sherwin's side of the story," suggested one of the party.

"Let him tell it."

All looked at Leland, but he said nothing. He looked only at Fearing, and Fearing looked only at the floor.

"Mr. Sherwin pleads not guilty," added Green, with something of pity in his voice. "He denies all Fearing has said, and defies him to prove any part of it."

"Are you his attorney?" asked a man who had never been Leland's friend, with sarcasm.

"I merely repeat what Mr. Sherwin has said."

Green answered quietly. He did not remember anything of the sort having been said by the accused, but he had begun to pity him, and was well aware that every one, innocent or guilty, desired to put in the same plea. He was deter-

mined that Leland, who seemed dazed, should have a fair show.

"Then it is a question of veracity between him and Fearing, with the proof to come later."

"Mr. Fearing," asked Green, "do you still insist that your story is correct?"

"Yes," answered the junior partner.

"You say that Sherwin approached you, and asked you to aid him in removing Philemon Bond?"

"I do say so," responded the major, looking more fixedly at the floor.

"You understood by the term 'remove' that your partner contemplated killing Bond?"

"It could mean nothing else!"

Leland gazed at the speaker in wonder. What influence had led him to lie so willfully?

"We have evidence that Bond is dead," went on the previous inquirer, "and we can do no more than to take it as proven until it is disproved. Gentlemen, I consider it our painful duty to put Leland Sherwin under arrest until the matter be investigated!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

WANTED!

It was generally known in Shadow Shaft that Leland Sherwin was under arrest for the murder of Philemon Bond. It was a shock to all, for they had been accustomed to look upon him as the personification of a perfect business man. Now he was fallen, and some were inclined to lose all faith in human nature. If the great were so guilty, what must the common men be?

Upon Ruth the blow fell with startling force. She could not think ill of him if the whole of Shadow Shaft rose to swear his life away. Sisterly confidence, if the sister be of the ordinary nature, defies slander, proof and all else.

She saw not the accusation, as such, but she saw the disgrace, and she believed she saw the injustice and wrong of the thing.

Her first move was to go and see Leland. From this interview she returned without gaining much. He declared his innocence, but was not able to say much more. He wanted time, he said, to think and study the way of clearing himself.

Once more at the house she sat down to think, herself. She was thus engaged when she had a caller. She was not in mood to see any one, but, when she was told it was a lady with important business to transact, she did not refuse the chance which might be offered thereby.

It was Zylpha Mayne who came in.

The latter did not seem the worse for her recent troubles, and she advanced to greet Ruth with an air which impressed Miss Sherwin favorably.

"I hope I do not intrude," she observed, hesitatingly.

"I remember you as one who has met with trouble here at Shadow Shaft, and for all such persons I have ready sympathy," Ruth returned.

"Do you not remember me further back than that?"

"I am aware that you called upon my brother when you first came to this town, and I presume this indicates acquaintance on your part, though I have no positive knowledge on the subject."

Zylpha looked relieved.

"I did know him casually, of old, and for that reason I have come to offer my sympathy and aid now he is in—trouble."

"You are very kind!" declared Ruth, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. "Did you know Leland well?"

"I may say I did."

"Then why did he not ask you here to stop when you first came to Shadow Shaft?"

Zylpha grew embarrassed.

"Our acquaintance was not such as to justify it. There was a good hotel, and your brother would have no real reason for taking me in here. That is all."

Zylpha felt she had explained but poorly, but she had to let it go at that. She hastened on to other matters.

"Can I help you in any way?"

"I really do not know what you can do, though I thank you very much for your kind offer, and there may yet come a chance when you can be of aid as you desire."

"Is the defense of Mr. Sherwin planned?"

"Defense!" echoed Ruth, with a start. "I don't know. But, surely, he will never come to trial. They have accused him now, but those who are so well acquainted with him must be aware that he is incapable of doing harm to any human being!"

Zylpha smiled wearily. She had once thought as Ruth did, but events in her own life had destroyed that beautiful faith.

"Have they appeared to assure you of this?"

"Who?"

"Those who will have such confidence in Mr. Sherwin."

Ruth's face flushed.

"No one has yet been here to say so," she admitted, her previous assumption of reliance not so marked.

"If you will allow me, I will say they are not likely to come. Do not misunderstand this remark. It does not mean anything derogatory to your brother, but experience has shown me that an accused person has sympathy from but

few. Bear this in mind in considering the chances of helping Mr. Sherwin. If your old neighbors appear and express this desired confidence, all well and good. If they come not, don't be surprised."

The practical wisdom of the more experienced girl convinced her companion, and Ruth grew frightened.

"What am I to do?" she asked, tremulously. "No one has come to me yet, and I don't know what to do for Leland. I don't know enough to help him; can it be nobody else will?"

Zylpha's eyes gleamed brightly.

"I for one will do what I can," she responded. "You may have been told that, when I was recently taken from my hotel by enemies, Mr. Sherwin generously gave his aid to help me out of my difficulties. I do not forget that, and all I ask now is a chance to return his kindness. His hour of trial has come—if we can discover the way to aid him, I will gladly do all I can."

"What do you suggest?"

"That Major Fearing be carefully investigated. Either your brother is guilty, or his partner has lied willfully about him. You can judge which it is."

"I need no help to do that; Leland is innocent, and Fearing has, indeed, lied outrageously!" Ruth cried.

"Why should he?"

"I don't know."

"Think again. Why should he, unless he did it to shield the guilt of another, and whom should he be so eager to shield as himself?"

The idea came over Ruth like a revelation.

"You have it!" she exclaimed; "Fearing is the one who is guilty!"

"I fully believe it. If we could only prove it!"

"How can we?"

They sat looking at each other in silent eloquence. Ruth was all zeal to save Leland, and, if she had but known it, Zylpha was equally anxious to help in that cause. The sister thought it very good in one a stranger to her to do so much. Little did she know of the events of the past; little did she suspect that Zylpha had not only womanly devotion to urge her on, but the additional motive of clearing her own reputation. And since Leland had worked so hard for her when she was in trouble herself, she felt she could do all this without abating any part of her own dignity, or seeming to overlook the unhappy events of the past without due cause.

"We should have the help of a man," finally observed Ruth.

"Do you know of any one?"

Ruth meditated. She did not, just then, think of the desired helper, and she said as much.

"It must be done, though," she added, "and I trust time will show us the way. We must find the way!"

As the way was not then visible, they did not advance perceptibly in the conversation which followed. Their zeal did not lessen, however, and when they parted it was with the agreement that both should continue not only to think, but to act, if opportunity was presented.

Zylpha was invited by her new friend to remain at the house, but that was just what she did not wish to do, and she managed to avoid it without giving offense or betraying the evasion.

When she walked away it was in a mood of deep thought. When she vowed to prove to Leland that she was not so black as he painted her she had not for a moment looked forward to this state of affairs. Leland had seemed entrenched in a citadel of honor and power, while she had seen no exterior way of bettering her own standing.

Now, the field had broadened; the chances had grown far more promising, in one sense, though she did not see the way clear to do him any great good. It was as strange as it was painful to see him thus accused, but it was the chance of her lifetime to act in his behalf.

"He cannot think me all evil," she murmured, "or he would not have spent a sleepless night on the mountain, looking for me. I can help him freely—if the chance is offered."

She was yet some rods from the hotel when she was accosted by a small boy.

"Missus," spoke this youth, "there's a woman over yonder who wants fer ter see ye."

He pointed toward the northern hills.

Zylpha came back to present life.

"Who is it?"

"Dunno! She didn't give no name, an' she don't belong hyer, but she seemed ter know her biz, she did. She said as how ef you come thar you would be wal paid fer it. Then she said she knowed Job Joy—mebbe you know him, but I don't—an' she could tell ye all about him ef you'd come ter her, but et must be private like. See? She says ter tell ye Job knows ye, an' Job is in need o' yer help; an' ef you come ter job you will be a pile richer for it. Now, what in sin do she mean, an' who is Job Joy?"

Zylpha did not need to ask the last question, if the boy did. She had not forgotten her old servant who had disappeared so mysteriously, nor had she forgotten the ten thousand dollars she had trusted to his care and never heard from.

"Do you say this woman is not of Shadow Shaft?" she demanded.

"I know all the old women hyer, an' she ain't one on 'em. No, sir; she don't belong hyer. I asked where she did hang out, but she wouldn't tell me. Said she wa'n't hev'n' no interview with me, but with you."

"Describe her!"

"Wal, she was sorter old an' wrinkled up, an' she kind of squints at a feller when she talks. Her chin plays checkers with her nose, they are so close together. That's about all I kin recollect."

It was not much, but Zylpha thought she recognized a woman who lived in her own town and had always taken an interest in her. Vague as the description was she determined to see the unknown and test the alleged important information.

"Lead the way!" she directed. "If you have brought me good news I will pay you well for it."

"Bank is always open for deposits," jocosely responded the small citizen.

He did lead the way, and Zylpha was conducted from the street of the town to a point well beyond the limits. As they advanced, Zylpha remembered there might be danger and paused for a time, but her guide was a plausible young person and she was soon induced to go on.

In a wild glen they were suddenly confronted by a woman, and Zylpha's faith went out like a candle. It was Amazon Moll, and the girl's fears suggested the rest.

"Good-morning, my pretty dove!" saluted Moll, with an absurd bow. "I hope I see you well and bloomin'!"

Miss Mayne had her opinion, but she tried to hide it and her fears, and answer calmly.

"I have nothing to say to you," she returned.

"I will pass on!"

"Will you?" mocked the Amazon. "Wal, it wouldn't surprise me in the least if you were mistaken in that! Pass on? Hardly! Not until we do the business which brought you hyer!"

CHAPTER XXX.

DRAWN REVOLVERS.

AMAZON MOLL's manner was insolent and overbearing, and she placed her arms akimbo and blocked the way with conscious power. The look she bestowed upon Zylpha was not to be mistaken, and when the latter turned to look for the boy who had brought her there, she was not surprised to discover he had disappeared.

Plainly he had lured her into a trap at Moll's bidding.

"I hev business with you!" added the Amazon, forcibly.

"I am not aware I have any with you," retorted Zylpha, with unexpected courage.

"Some folks don't know all things, an' you are one o' them, my downy dove. What you want, an' don't want, don't go fer nothin', though. I am boss hyer!"

Zylpha made an effort to be patient.

"What do you wish?" she asked.

"I don't 'wish' nothin'. What I hev planned is ter be, an' you won't be in it! I'll come ter the point, though. Girl, these are wild an' woolly days in Shadow Shaft. The mighty are fallen, an' the weak are goin' ter git on top ef they be persecuted fer the time bein'. Your lover is in prison, an' so is Arad Huse—a man worth a dozen of Leland Sherwin. He shall not stay there; he shall not!"

"What have I to do with this?" inquired Zylpha, mildly.

"I'll show you!"

The Amazon suddenly brought out pen, ink and paper. These were strange things for one of the Cast-off Crew to have, and the newness of everything indicated that they had been purchased for the occasion.

Pointing to a certain place, Moll added:

"Sign your name there!"

"For what reason?" Zylpha asked, wonderingly.

"That's my business. All you have to do is to sign. Take the pen. Take it and sign!"

"I must see the contents of the paper first," was the firm answer.

"Look, then!"

Moll suddenly spread the paper out, and Zylpha saw there was not a mark on its surface.

"Sign!" the Amazon repeated.

"Sign a blank paper? Hardly! I decline. I know not what you are trying to do, but your plan will not work. I will not sign it!"

Moll brought her foot down heavily on the ground.

"I say you will!" she almost shouted. "Don't think you can run this matter to suit yourself, for it will not do. You had a taste of my quality when you were at the Huse house. You got away somehow; I know not how, but it will not happen again. You will sign, blank or no blank, an' don't you make any mistake in that. See?"

She made a motion and Lute Huse came out of ambush. He was more forbidding of aspect, then, than usual, and he scowled upon Zylpha in a truly piratical style.

"You observe we have the whip-row," pursued Moll. "I could take you, all alone, and crush you as I would a thing of glass, but if you

hev one doubt of that you will notice I am *not* alone. Lute and I hev got you where you can't kick, so you may as wai come ter the rack. Will you sign now?"

Zylpha did not underestimate her danger. She had seen enough of husband and wife while in their company before to know they were utterly merciless. Now, she was frightened enough, but she determined not to sign the paper.

Moll had given her a clew to what would be filled in when referring to Leland, and though the exact purport of the proposed article was not to be guessed, it was plain it was something which would be an injury to him. Perhaps they aspired to put her name to some false statement which would ruin him.

Her reply was firm:

"I will not sign!"

"Lute!" cried Moll, in a rage, "will you strangle the young cub?"

"I will ef she don't take it back!" growled the miner. "Gal, don't fool with chain-lightnin'; et ain't safe. We say you will sign the thing, an' by thunder you will! No denyin' now; et won't go, an' you will git inter the worst fix you ever did hear of. See?"

He raised his big hand, half threatening a blow, and his scowl grew deeper. Zylpha looked around in vain for help. She knew not to what end these thugs might go. She feared for her life.

Despite this, she did not waver.

"Perhaps you have it in your power to do what you choose, but you will gain nothing by violence," she declared. "If you were to kill me, you could not get it signed, and, living, I surely will not obey!"

"Durn it! we'll see about that!"

Lute lost his small measure of patience and, moving quickly forward, grasped Zylpha's arm roughly. Moll had picked up a club which chanced to be at hand, and the peril became a startling fact when Lute drew a long, ugly-looking knife.

"You talk o' death!" he went on, savagely. "Wal, you shall know more of it than talk ef you don't sign. Put yer name ter the dockymunt, or I'll use the carver!"

Zylpha gasped as if for breath, but could not command her voice sufficiently to call for help. She did not doubt that the threat was made in earnest, and horror stilled her completely.

She struggled feebly in Lute's grasp, but even if she had broken it, could not have escaped. On one side of her was a high rock; on the other, her foes.

"Sign!" snarled the miner. "Sign, or—"

At that point something happened which was not planned by Lute. His legs suddenly ceased to support him, and he fell to the earth with a heavy shock. Zylpha, thus released, gazed dumbly and saw him sprawling on his back, while on his neck was a human foot which held him fast.

And the owner of the foot was Gabe Gall.

It was a serious matter to every one else, but the Gambolier did not appear to be in the least troubled. He was dressed in his best and seemed out for nothing but pleasure, yet it was to be noticed he put enough strength in the pressure of his foot to hold Lute fast.

At the same time, removing his hat, he made a deep bow and smiled upon the women in the party like a true gallant. It was a singular contrast, and yet one very much like him.

The pause was but brief.

"I hope you'll excuse my intrusion," remarked Gabe Gall, airily, "but you'll see my friendly feelings got the better of me!"

Nobody said anything in reply. The Huse brood were too much dumfounded to summon words at once. The Gambolier's smile had never been more sunny and pleasant.

"When I see a picnic," Gabe added, "I can't help taking part in it, and when I do, I put my best foot forward."

Lute was beginning to recover his wits a little, and it occurred to him that he did not like the touch of the foot on his neck.

"Let me up!" he hissed, struggling feebly.

"Just as soon as I get through talking with the ladies," promised Gabriel. "Be a good fellow and don't hurry the thing. Dame Huse, is that your spring bonnet you are sporting? I assure you that you look immense in it!"

"Devil!" screamed the Amazon, "what are you trying to do?"

"Only taking part in the picnic, good soul."

Lute happened to remember he had a knife in his hand, and he made a desperate effort to strike his master, but Gabe was on the watch for just such a move. He was holding a cane-like stick which looked too frail for any practical use, but he swept it around and knocked Lute's knife away with one motion.

"Let the love-feast go on!" he pleasantly requested.

"Kill the devil!" implored Lute, his eyes upon his wife.

The direction stirred Moll into fresh life. She made a dive for the knife and secured it. Zylpha grew freshly alarmed, for she knew Moll was the match of an ordinary man, but the Gambolier was not in the least troubled. By some mysterious twist of his foot he rolled Lute over on his face, and in a moment more Moll found herself gazing at a pair of revolvers.

"I'll trouble you to keep your distance!" calmly added the Gambolier. "If you compel me to shoot, the chances are I shall hit something. I might even make it unpleasant for you!"

So Moll thought. She had the courage of a man, but not madness enough to rush upon the weapon. She stopped short, while Lute floundered around and succeeded in getting upon his feet.

His wrath was at the boiling point, and he thought he saw his way clear to end the affair at once. He had a deep contempt for the somewhat elaborately dressed man who had interfered, and intended to finish him up without the least delay.

Out from his own pocket came a revolver.

"I'll fix ye!" he gasped. "I'll learn ye ter—"

He had thought it necessary to announce his intentions. Gabe gave him due time, but now he flashed upon the miner a look no one would have believed him capable of.

"Drop that weapon!" he deeply uttered. "I say drop it, or you are a dead man!"

It was no uncertain language, and its tone went home to Lute's mind. He had no desire to fight a brave man with the advantage against him, and the brief order put Gabe in a new light.

The weakling disappeared; it was clear Huse had to deal with one used to such matters, and the revolver slowly went down in his grasp.

"On the ground!" ordered the Gambolier.

Lute glared his wrath, but he dared do no more. Not only did he realize the mettle of his opponent, at last, but he was so dazed at finding Gabe possessed of such qualities that he was unable to do himself full justice.

He dropped the revolver to the ground.

"Now you look better," added Mr. Gall. "You didn't appear pretty with your eyes glittering so wildly. One could almost fancy you had the nature of a tiger under your mild exterior."

Not a word said Luther Huse. He had come to conquer, and not a fear had disturbed his mind; strong in the possession of brute power he had imagined he could carry all before him, and now all had gone wrong.

Amazon Moll was not so silent. Her eyes blazed as she regarded her husband.

"Oh! you coward!" she hissed, "will you give up like that? At him, man; at him, unless you want me to despise you!"

"I'd rather be a live coward than a dead fool," retorted Lute, sullenly. "Ef you want ter be a hero, go in an' do it!"

"Will you let that little dandy beat you out?"

"I'll let a six-shooter hev its own way," frankly returned Mr. Huse. "I know the weapon, an' I don't hanker ter eat its stomach-food."

"Coward, coward!"

The Amazon swung her arms wildly, but Gabe smiled in his slow, lazy way. He composedly advised:

"Take it easy, my good soul! Your husband is a man of excellent horse sense. Don't you play the mule!"

"I'll live to kill you!" Moll shouted.

"Well planned; you can't kill me after you are dead!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FOOL BLOCKS THE GAME.

GABE seemed incapable of getting excited, and his easy way almost sent Amazon Moll into a fit, but he did not give her a chance to waste many more words. Suddenly changing his manner, but remaining as cool as ever, he sharply resumed:

"If you two had your just deserts you would be swung up by Judge Lynch inside of ten minutes. I am half-tempted to put you in the way of such usage, but you are not worth notice except in one respect. You have to-day disgraced yourselves by persecuting a woman. If I catch you at it again I will make you regret it to the day of your death. You vile wretches; you should be flogged like dogs!"

Lute and his wife had no honest pride, but the reproof touched them deeply in one way: it was hard to be thus lorded over and have no redress.

The Gambolier turned to Zylpha for the first time.

"Miss Mayne, have they done you actual harm?" he asked.

"Thanks to you, they have not."

"Then we'll let them go. Skip!"

He waved his revolver at the evil pair, and they saw fit to depart. Muttering threats, they moved toward the town.

"You and I want to follow their example," Gabe observed. "I have Lute's weapon here, but he may think of some way to get square, if we allow him time enough. Unless you have business here, let us go."

Zylpha was only too glad to comply, so they beat a prompt retreat.

"I suppose they intercepted you?" he questioned.

"On the contrary, I was lured here by a device

of theirs. I did not suspect whom I was to meet until I reached this point and saw them. You can, perhaps, imagine my horror, and I need only add that I am very grateful to you."

"I see. But what did they want of you?"

Zylpha hesitated.

"Let me save you from answering. I may have done wrong, but I did not interfere until I had done enough listening to get on to the facts a trifle. They wanted you to sign a paper. What paper? And why should you sign it?"

"I do not know what the paper was to be. It was blank."

"You must have some idea."

"I have vaguely. Lately I was for some time missing from Shadow Shaft. I have not told where I was during that time, but it was in their power. Now, it is quite possible that they would have tried to make me sign some document which would clear them."

"Isn't it more likely they were aiming at Leland Sherwin?"

The terse inquiry made Zylpha stop short.

"Why at him?"

"You ask it innocently, but I fancy you are not wholly at fault. You are Sherwin's friend. So am I!"

"Then prove it!" cried Zylpha suddenly.

"How?"

"By helping him when he is in trouble."

"Show me the way and I will do it. Lele and I are the best of friends," added the Gambolier, unblushingly. "We are about of the Damon and Pythias stamp, and whatever I can do for him I will, gladly."

"What is needed is some shrewd man who can work zealously in his behalf."

"That's about my size," modestly assured the Gambolier. "Show me how to do it."

"If I knew that, I might possibly be able to do all myself. I do not see, and it is because of that I wish you to act in our behalf."

"Tell me just how the case stands!"

It was a frank invitation, but Zylpha was not ready to lay bare all the secrets of the defense. She and Ruth were chiefly troubled because they knew so little, and it was to gain more that they wanted an aid who could work as they could not.

She told Gabe what she thought prudent, but the burden of her explanation was that she was sure Leland was innocent, and she and Ruth desired Gabe to prove it.

The Gambolier was disappointed. He was in search of information, too, and he felt that he was not getting all Zylpha could tell. This doubt he concealed, and seemed to enter heartily into the plans of the two girls. He assured Zylpha he would aid them to the extent of his ability.

It was not much of a promise, since there was no knowing just how much his services would be worth even if he was loyal, but when they separated she felt more encouraged.

Gabe left her at the hotel and walked away down the street. His usually careless face was somewhat grave as he went. His movements may have been mechanical, but they brought him back to Sherwin's, and to where Ruth was sitting on the piazza.

She had gone out there to let people see she was not overwhelmed by trouble, for she thought her own actions might be of moral value to Leland, if nothing more; but she had not improved matters much. Her expression was one of great gravity.

Gabriel Gall sat down with his old nonchalance.

"How goes it?" he asked, lightly.

"I don't know, Mr. Gall," Ruth coldly returned.

"I've just come from your friend, Miss Mayne."

"Have you?"

"Yes; and she and I have been trying to perfect plans for the defense of your brother."

At last Ruth was interested. Her expression changed, and she regarded Gabe closely.

"What plans?"

"Well, I told her I could not do much until I had seen you."

If Zylpha had been there it might have puzzled her to remember any such remark from the Gambolier, but he did not seem at all abashed as he went on:

"Fact is, I am bound to get Lele out of this scrape, but you will have to be very frank, and so I told Miss Mayne. I have not suspected from Lele's vague remarks to me that the matter was so serious, before. In fact, I've rather been inclined to laugh at his fears."

Ruth hesitated. She did not know what to make of Gabriel Gall. Had Leland really confided in him thus? There might be enemies, as well as friends, working to get information.

"Whatever Leland has told you is doubtless true," she diplomatically replied. "As to the degree of his information I know nothing, however."

"Well, let us go over the ground and get all the light we can."

Ruth did not object, and the affair was duly discussed. Gabe did most of the talking, and was as glib as usual. Ruth listened anxiously to all, but did not for a moment cease to be on her guard. Finally, the man from Great Hump suggested that if she knew anything more she should make it known to him.

If it was a trap it did not succeed. Ruth remained cautious, loyal as the mountains, themselves, to her brother. Then Gabe persevered, and was in the midst of a regular cross-examination when some one was heard to clear his throat gently close at hand.

They turned and saw Dreamer Dick.

The boy's face bore its usual mild expression, and he looked only at Ruth.

"It is a good day for specimens," he remarked quietly.

"Why not run and find them, then?" asked Gabe disgusted with the interruption.

"Specimens are everywhere," calmly returned Richard. "They live in the wood, in the rocks, in the water, and in the house."

"What ones do you find in the house?" Gabe inquired.

Dick partially unclosed his hand. He had a long-legged, ungainly and peculiar insect of some sort best known to himself.

"Here is one," he explained. "I call him the 'spy,' because he is of that nature. He does not work for a living as far as I have been able to learn, but he is just as active. He goes around and with his sharp proboscis bores into the wood-work, defacing it and tearing it up without any good motive, as far as I can see. It is as if he were trying to find out somebody's secrets, which is why I call him the 'spy!'"

Richard was looking at Gabe Gall, now. His remarks were so suggestive that Ruth quickly turned her own gaze in the same direction. She was surprised to see a deep flush rise to Gabriel's face. The man of monumental assurance was plainly embarrassed, and it was a fact worth mentioning.

Gabe could have kicked himself for the exhibition of weakness, but he could not prevent it.

As usual, Dick had scored a point against him when no one else could have done it. The power of the boy over him was unexplainable, but it existed.

The Dreamer remained regarding Gabe mildly until the latter found his voice again.

"You are quite original in your ways."

"I don't like to see the spies boring for information," gently answered the boy.

"What do you do?"

"Catch them!"

"You have one now, I see."

"Yes, and I am looking for another. I want a pair. I think I can hear one boring near here!"

Never had Richard been milder of manner, but Gabe was sure the shot was aimed at him. He was certain Dick had been acting the listener, and had interfered when he did, simply to save Ruth from more questioning.

"Your ears must be sharp," the man from Great Hump commented. "It is said that when one faculty is dwarfed another becomes the more active and strong. Your mental weakness may be answerable for your remarkable sense of hearing."

"Possibly you are right. Perhaps, too, this is why I can hear so easily when men call me 'fool!' Did you ever know another fool, sir?"

"Not like you!" Gabe candidly confessed.

"There is a good deal of comfort in being one. Other people worry—I never do. Give me enough to eat, and I am happy and content. The mind that is free from worry and plots is to be envied."

Dreamer Dick had sat down and Gabe was quite sure he would keep his place and protect Ruth. If he did there was no chance for the Gambolier, and he did not intend to remain there.

Ignoring Dick, he conversed for awhile with Ruth; then made an excuse and went away. Richard watched him in thoughtful silence.

Ruth was well aware that the boy's folly was not of such pronounced nature as most persons supposed, so she suddenly asked:

"What do you think of Mr. Gall?"

"I pity that man!" replied Dick, soberly.

"Pity him? Why?"

"He thinks too much! It must make his head go round and round like a top. Buzz! buzz! Don't think too much, Ruth; it will make you feel like a top, and your head will hum like a saw that whirls so fast in a mill."

"What does Mr. Gall think about?"

"Specimens!"

"Specimens?"

"Yes; he hunts them. He don't tell all he knows, but he is as great at it as I. The only difference is he don't hunt the same sort. He would not stick a pin through his specimen, but hang them up by the neck!"

"Richard, you are wiser than you seem. What idea is in your mind? What do you know of him that I don't know?"

"But little. I can only tell that he is often astir when he is supposed to be abed. He hunts for specimens. Why? What sort of specimens? What does he want to do with them?"

"Don't you know?"

"No. When I try to think my head goes round and round. It never pays to think. Don't do it!"

Ruth did not know what to believe in regard to Dick. One moment he was wise in his ways, she thought; the next he went to rambling wildly. Did he know something, or—nothing?"

She questioned him further, but gained nothing by it. If he had any deep knowledge he kept the fact to himself, and was deaf to all her traps and pleas.

She was doubly disappointed. She longed to get his full information and weigh it, and the knowledge that she might miss something through his weakness was painful. It was not all that troubled her. When she had talked with him without getting much of any information except that he had seen Gabe wandering around mysteriously, she summed up all in one sentence not spoken aloud:

"I did not think that of him!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRACKING HUMAN GAME.

GABE GALL came back in due time. He was calm, and this was saying a good deal. All Shadow Shaft was excited on that day—all but him. There was much for others to think about, but if he did any thinking it did not seem to interfere with his peace of mind.

His serene face was the only oasis in the troubled town.

When he reached the Sherwin house Ruth was gone from the piazza, and Dreamer Dick had disappeared. Gabe did not try to find either. Instead, he wandered calmly into the kitchen and looked for Dorcas Huse. It was the hour when that lady was generally the most busy over the culinary products, but it was not so then. Gabe sat down and waited.

Whatever the Gambolier thought, whatever he was trying to do, and whatever motives actuated his course, he had a firm grasp on the way things were going in some quarters, if not in all.

First, his claim to Dorcas that he had seen a "ghost," or other intruder, in his room, was simply the concoction of his prolific fancy. He had seen and heard nothing of the kind, and had simply put in the claim to work upon the housekeeper.

If, however, he had no such mystery, it did not follow that the house was destitute of them. Dorcas was worried. He knew that, and much of the wandering to which Dreamer Dick had referred was the result of the Gambolier's efforts to solve mysteries known and suspected in connection with Mrs. Huse.

Since the arrest she had been especially interesting to Gabe. He noticed her pale, drawn, half-scared face, and knew she was in a mood where something was likely to occur. He was enough of a student of human nature to see that she was a fit mother of the three sons who dwelt above the town, and that Arad, Lute and Ab had come honestly by their traits. She might hide them where she acted a wily part, but the same feelings were in mother and sons.

Only Dreamer Dick was a mystery to the man from Great Hump.

Gabe looked around at the spotless kitchen.

"A model housekeeper," he murmured, "but Lele may thank his lucky stars she has never seen fit to put poison in his food. A rare old bird is Dorcas, and she may yet prove it!"

He wished to see this "rare old bird" then, but she did not come. Others soon wished to see her, too, for supper was desired, but she did not return, and such a supper as others could prepare had to be accepted for the occasion.

Afterward, Gabe went out and smoked in solitude near the house. What he had in mind no one knew, if, indeed, he was observed, but he was not all wrapped up in his cigar.

As the evening wore on he deserted his post and, to all appearance retired for the night. From that time no light showed in his room, but he was not asleep.

He had played a trick, and was outside soon after his light disappeared. There he waited patiently and secretly. After a time he went toward the rear and seemed to get sight of something which was of interest. Again he waited, and the result was soon to be seen.

A man came out of the kitchen, fastened the door and moved quietly and quickly away. Under his arm he carried a package of some sort.

"So!" murmured Gabe, "it is our gentle friend, Richard. Dorcas has been missing something from the kitchen right along, and has wondered who was the thief. Richard now has a something, and is very secret in his movements. What Dorcas has missed has been food. Can it be that Dick, pampered and highly fed child of fortune, has been gorging himself unduly with pies and cakes? Can it be his leanness of form is due to rash eating? We will see!"

The bug-hunter was moving rapidly away, and Gabe kept near him.

Occasionally the boy looked around, but Gabe was shrewd enough to foil any attempt at detection, so nothing came of it.

"Headed for the hills!" the Gambolier went on. "Why does he go there? Sometimes the drunkard goes away to pour down his poison in solitude. Is that the way gentle Richard takes to imbibe his pies and cakes? Oh! what a sly dog you are, Dick Huse!"

There was sarcasm and satisfaction in Gabe's manner, but there was more of interest. As has

been seen he had long before abandoned the prevalent idea that Dick was weak-minded. Regarding him as a shrewd plotter—for reasons good or bad, as the case might prove—he was now eager to get at the bottom of the secret, and see what would come of it.

The boy soon passed the last house of the town, but did not pause. On into the hills he went, and with each rod traversed his object grew to be more of a conundrum.

"Oh! you sly dog!" muttered Gabe, for the twentieth time.

The pursuer was less used to walking the rough way, and he did not find it easy or pleasant, but his zeal did not for a moment flag.

Richard no longer indulged in looks toward the river, as far as Gabe could see, and it appeared that he no longer had any fear of discovery or pursuit. This made it more pleasant for Gabe, and enabled him to give closer attention to the task of avoiding the breaking of his neck on the rocks, and in the gaps in the earth by the way.

At one time Dick seemed to be heading for the place where Arad Huse claimed he had found a dead man's body, but he finally turned away and bore more to the west.

Every moment the pursuer grew more perplexed. All of his reasoning failed to suggest a reason why all this should be done. Richard was an enthusiast in the matter of "specimens," but, though his knowledge was limited, Gabe could not see why he should go to the roughest and most tangled part of the hills at that hour.

Finally, they were so far up that, looking back, the Gambolier saw Shadow Shaft lying far below. It was at least two miles distant, and he realized the fact fully—he could feel every rod of the way in his weary legs, as it were.

"Is the young wretch heading for the top of the Rockies?" wondered Gabe, with a groan.

He was exaggerating certain elements of the journey. Far as they had gone they were still on a level with ground often traveled by the men of Shadow Shaft. The trail from Rooster Run was now close to them. It came down the mountain circuitously, to get the advantage of the lay of land, and Dick had merely shortened the distance by taking a direct route.

Occasionally, Gabe had lost sight of his game, but only for a moment, and owing to the nature of the rough ground. This constant recovery did not make him grow careless, but something finally happened which was not to his taste.

Again he lost sight of the boy. Calmly he kept on, confident that it would amount to nothing, but when he turned a corner he did not see him. The light was not bad; all things seemed in his favor, yet he was like one alone on the mountain.

He quickened his pace and looked eagerly for Dick. Dick was not visible.

As it dawned upon the pursuer that he was in danger of losing his game he grew excited and made a zealous, but systematic, effort to regain the lost ground. Here and there he went, but there was no Dick.

"By Jove! the youngster has beaten me out!" he exclaimed. "Yes; and he must have gotten on to the pursuit I supposed was so sly. Ye gods! and all this after my tramp up the mountain! I could strangle Dick Huse with good relish!"

He did not mean as bad as he said, yet it was none the less a severe blow. He was in a fever of annoyance.

If he had felt any doubt that he was thrown off the track by design the doubt would have been dispelled by the fact that he readily found proof of a cunning trick. The lay of the land, and the fact that he had had his eyes on a certain spot all the while proved that Dick had doubled on his own track around a wedge-like rock when he so suddenly went out of sight.

"Oh! yes; this boy is a 'fool'!" muttered Gabe with his grim humor. "He's a fool, but may Providence save me from running onto another fool like this one!"

For some time longer he wandered around, having a vague notion he might chance upon Dick, but the hope was so small that he finally turned his face toward the trail and was walking quite briskly when he had the second surprise of the night.

Right at the brow of a rock he came face to face with Dick Huse.

It was a mutual surprise, this time, and they paused and regarded each other in silence. But Gabe was not long in recovering his wits.

"How are you, buggist?" he saluted.

Calm was the boy's answer:

"I am quite well, sir."

"You look it. Have you got your business all done?"

"I am only out for pleasure, sir," Richard gently replied.

"Um! What have you done with that package of yours?"

"Package?"

"Yes; you started out with one under your arm, you know. Whether you got it by robbing the Sherwin larder I know not, and it is not important, but I would like to know if you succeeded in delivering it safely."

"You talk in riddles, sir."

"If you will be less polite, and more truthful,

you will oblige me, my festive youth. Never mind the 'sir!' What have you been doing?"

Gabe tried the experiment of using an imperative tone, but the boy did not seem in the least abashed or alarmed.

"I am somewhat surprised that you are interested in my movements, sir," he affirmed, mildly, "but I will assure you this is only a pleasure trip. Sometimes I go out to look for specimens even at a late hour, but it was not so to-night. I got to thinking, and the thoughts got all tangled up in my brain. My head went round and round, until it was like a top. It's a bad thing for any one to think, sir, and you know my head is not strong."

"I know nothing of the sort!" Gabe retorted. "Others you may deceive, boy, but me you cannot. I am dead onto you. What have you been doing?"

"You are prone to wrong me, sir," mildly reproved Richard.

"Rubbish! Let us talk like men of sense. Your device does not go down with me; I see in you a chap as acute as they make them. I am not ready to say why you have so long befuddled and befogged your acquaintances here, but I am not in the dark. Now, why are you robbing the Sherwin larder and taking your plunder here?"

Richard shook his head gravely.

"I think it is useless for us to try to understand each other, sir. We seem to be far apart, and you are bound to keep us there."

"Listen, boy! Every one at Sherwin's is well fed. Despite this, some one has been making inroads on the kitchen supplies for days past. Your mother had wondered in vain who it was. I now know; it was you, Sir Richard. To night you took the usual supply here. I followed; you discovered me, and, I regret to say, you gave me the grand shake. Where have you been since then? What have you been doing? What has become of your package?"

"Friend, you are not well this evening. You have been thinking, I fear, and it has been bad for you. It has made your head go around!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

PRONOUNCED DEAD.

DREAMER DICK looked solicitously at Gabe Gall, while the latter felt the old impulse to take the boy by the neck and throttle him.

"I give you up," he replied, after a pause. "You are too deep for me; I would as soon try to wrest every secret from the bosom of this stupendous mountain as from you. You have beaten me at every turn—I confess it with shame. Have your own way. Yet, if you are a friend to Leland Sherwin, remember there is more than yourself to think of at this particular time. He is in serious trouble, and I cannot but think it may be in your power to aid him. If you can, do not hesitate to do it. He has been your friend; don't forget that, and don't neglect any chance to do him a favor in return."

Dick had listened with more than usual attention.

"Can you suggest anything?" he asked.

"Not while you keep me in the dark."

"What does he need?"

"Proof of innocence!"

"That I know not of."

"Have you given it thought?"

"Somewhat, sir."

"You may know of some favorable fact?"

"No; I know of none."

"Is Philemon Bond dead?"

"If that is what you have on your mind, sir, I will say in all sincerity that I know nothing about it. I have listened to what others have said, but they have not told me much, and I know nothing."

"I am disappointed; I confess I am. There is some mystery in your life, peaceful and uneventful as the ordinary man thinks it, and I was in hopes it pointed to the solution of the mystery. You say you know nothing?"

Dreamer Dick shifted his position several times before answering the question. Finally he replied:

"There may be some things which mean more than I think. When I try to think my head goes round, you know."

Gabe did not believe in this talk about a weak head at all, but he let it go patiently now.

"I will tell you what I have seen," pursued the boy. "Once you found a coat among the rocks, and took it to your room. You lost it. This was because I stole it!"

Gabe was not surprised. He took it very calmly.

"Why did you steal it?"

"Just after Philemon Bond disappeared," responded Dick, with great deliberation, "I found that coat among the rocks. I noticed it was like Bond's, and this frightened me. I never mentioned it to anybody, but hid it where you found it."

"You saw me take it away?"

"Yes. And I took it back."

"I am not surprised. What do you think of it?"

"Once I did think Bond had been murdered, but I doubt it now. I think that coat was marked with the knife-cut to deceive folks."

"Why do you think that?"

"I don't know, except that it does not seem like what a murderer would do. He would be more likely to bury it, where nobody would find it at all. If anybody killed Mr. Bond for his money, why should they save a little thing like that, when they would know there was a chance they might get found out, and but little chance of their being able to wear it safely? I can't make you see this as I do, perhaps, but the idea is strong in my mind."

"What else?"

"Nothing."

"Did you really hear the talk in Bond's room, the night he disappeared?—the struggle, and so on?"

"I heard it just as I said, some days ago."

"You say the voice was like Sherwin's?"

"I thought so then, but not now. It would not surprise me if Bond was alone there, and the struggle was no more than him moving around. Why he should do it I don't know?"

Gabe Gall was silent. Something in the suggestion awakened ideas which had been strong in his own mind, and the fact impressed him not a little.

Dreamer Dick improved the pause to survey the stars in his most unconcerned manner. Probably he was sorry he could not wander up that way in search of "specimens."

For the first time Gabe had got him in a communicative mood, and he tried to continue. The boy's present trip still interested him, and he attempted to learn what it meant. Here he was baffled. Dick persisted that he had come out only because he had been troubled by his head, which would persist in "going round and round" whenever he thought, and Gabe had to let it go at that.

"I only hope you are not keeping anything quiet which will work to the injury of those to whom you ought to be grateful," Gabe warningly said, in conclusion.

"Not at all; I should be glad to act in the case, but it is only my head. I think too much!"

The Gambolier gave up in disgust. He did not believe the bug-hunter, but saw he might as well talk to the deaf mountains.

They walked back to Shadow Shaft together, entered the house, and saw each other no more that night.

In the morning the situation was not visibly changed, but the wearing on of the day brought a different aspect to the case.

Gabe had intended to be on the watch and the alert, but one thing missed his notice until a rumor ran through the town:

"Bond's body has been found!"

Evil news spreads fast. It was not long before the whole town had heard the whisper, and that other facts went to confirm all Arad Huse had said in his story. The body had been discovered near the place where he affirmed he had buried it, and the voice of the people decided:

"He was honest, and Sherwin must be guilty!"

Gabe Gall heard the body was at a certain public building, and he hastened that way. He was lucky enough to be among the first to arrive.

At that time the great men of the town were engaged in the process of an elaborate identification. All had known Bond more or less, and were well qualified to determine whether the body was his. But they also remembered that one man above all others had been given a chance to know much about Philemon Bond. John Brown had acted as his valet, off and on, for years.

The colored man had been sent for, and he arrived while Gabe was present. John Brown was impressed with the solemnity of the occasion, and the fact that he ought not to err, and he went about the work with zeal and care.

When he finally paused and looked up, every one felt that he would make no mistake, surely.

"Well, John?" questioned a merchant.

"Gentlemen," gravely returned the colored person, "that is Mr. Philemon Bond!"

A hush fell upon the listeners, but it was only brief.

"Are you sure?"

"I've helped him on an' off with his clothes more times than a few, an' I can't be mistaken. Ef I was at all uncertain, I would say so, but I ain't. Gents, I can swear that was Mr. Bond!"

"That settles it!"

So said one man, and all agreed with him.

"Sherwin killed him and buried him out there," remarked a jealous person.

Some one wished to know why Arad Huse had acted as he did, but the question was not discussed.

As for Gabe Gall, he did not believe Arad had done the killing. If he had been so minded, he might have told why Arad had failed to find the body when he searched. It was Gabe who had removed it, and there were the best of reasons why Arad had failed to find it when he went to the place with the party of citizens; but it had not been far removed, and the subsequent search had developed it.

Having decided that the body was that of Philemon Bond, the leading men of the town went into a committee of the whole and discussed the question of what should be done with Arad.

Some of them were strong in declaring that he was a misused man while they had him in custody, and they were pronounced in their assertions of opinion.

The result of it all was that they decided to liberate him at once, and an order to that effect was duly given.

Before nightfall the leader of the Cast-off Crew was walking the streets in safety, while Leland was still behind the bars.

Major Ward Fearing was besieged with interrogations, but did not succeed in adding to the story he had at first told. He persisted, however, in the statement that he had been approached by Sherwin with the suggestions he had revealed to the public, and only Leland's best friends had any faith in his innocence. He was generally set down as guilty.

It was while matters were at this stage that Zylpha Mayne had a caller. It was Ab Huse. He came very quietly for one of the Cast-off Crew, and evinced a desire to avoid notice when he was there. Luck favored him, and he stood before the girl with no other person to hear.

For once he yielded to the ways of the better classes in life, and bared his head in Zylpha's presence.

"Miss," he began, "I have somewhat to say to you. You know me?"

"I ought to!" she agreed.

"So you had; so you had; but I ask ye ter remember I never did ye no harm. All the while ye was thar I was on your side. I always took yer part, an' I stood ready ter do more. I wanted them ter let ye go, but I couldn't rule the whole o' the others."

He paused. Zylpha wondered what was coming, but she waited for Ab to make himself plain.

"I watched ye sharp," the miner resumed, "an' ef you had been in any danger I'd hev given ye help or died in doin' it. I told ye so then, an' I meant it. Yes; I'd hev died fer you!"

Again he stopped. He seemed to crave some good word from her, but none came.

"Nobody was any gladder than me when you got away, an' I ain't done bein' glad yet. But that ain't what I came hyer fer. Leland Sherwin is in prison!"

The last words were abruptly spoken. Zylpha looked at him the more earnestly. What was coming?

"Yes," she agreed.

"Gal, I'm only a rough miner, but I love ye—love ye true—an' ef you kin promise me the reward, I may be able ter set him free."

"How?"

"By findin' the man who killed Bond!"

"Can you do that?"

"We'll see after I get my answer."

"And the—the reward?" she hesitatingly asked.

"Miss," and his eyes seemed to blaze, "thar kin be but one reward. Marry me, an' Lele Sherwin shall be saved!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A DANGEROUS PLAN.

ZYLPHA gazed at the miner with feelings of dismay and disgust. The idea that she would give her hand to one like him was too much to be considered seriously under ordinary circumstances, but the present circumstances were not of that kind.

His offer was distinct; he promised to save Leland if she would marry him as a reward.

It occurred to her that this was the chance for which she had been longing. Unless he was talking wholly for effect, it might be possible to gain something by seeming to accede to his request.

"Why should I care for Leland Sherwin, or if he be proved innocent or guilty?" she asked, slowly.

"You know him, an' you know his sister."

"True."

"You kin do them a favor, an' me one at the same time."

"Well, what evidence have you to present?"

Ab's eyes twinkled sagaciously.

"When we are married I'll tell ye. It can't seem out o' the way ter you ef I make sure o' my grip afore I tell my secret."

"No; and you cannot blame me for being equally careful. I want to hear the evidence you have ere I take such a momentous step. This right any man cannot help giving to a lady."

Ab looked bewildered. Oddly enough, while planning for his own safety, he had not once thought that it was a two-edged sword which he had put into the case. Now he stood dazed and uncertain.

"Wal, durn it all!" he finally ejaculated. "I don't see how both of us are to hev the safe grip at once!"

"Suppose we mutually give way a point?"

"How?"

Zylpha did not know how, herself, but she tried to catch at some plan. The idea was growing in her mind that Ab could tell enough to clear Leland, if it could be got from him, and that it rested upon her to make a success or failure of the case. Catching at the solution of the riddle, she found the clew vaguely, if not satisfactorily.

"You can send for the minister, and then tell the story," she suggested.

The miner's eyes blazed.

"I'll do it, by durn!" he cried.

The plan once laid, the principals began to think upon it. Zylpha realized that she had made the rashest of pledges. If there was any miscarriage of her devices—and all this was yet to be arranged—she would be placed in a way which made her shudder as she contemplated the possibility. Ab, on his part, grew suspicious. He had expected a long struggle for victory, and now he found the battle apparently won without difficulty.

He scowled forbiddingly.

"Et's fair play, now. Eh?"

"I can answer only for myself."

"You ain't done that, yet!"

"I do, now; I will adhere to my plans to the latter," she forced herself to say.

"An' you give me leave ter bring a minister hyer an' you promise ter marry me as soon as I give proof that Sherwin is innocent?"

Zylpha would have given much to avoid answering that question, but there was no way out of it; she must either abandon all hope of helping Leland, or do her part with Ab without regard to truth, or anything but the mighty matter at stake.

Her reply was steady:

"Yes!"

Ab glared fiercely at her. He was no fool, and he was now beset with many doubts, but was enough like other men so that his better judgment was blunted, if not destroyed, by his love for her.

"I shall keep my word," he slowly remarked.

"And I!"

The miner moved uneasily. He wanted to challenge that assertion, and might have done it if he had been a man of the world, experienced in the art of saying things well, but he could not bring his clumsy tongue to deal in diplomatic ways.

He avoided the danger, and finally said abruptly:

"Will ter-morrer night be any too soon?"

"As well then as any time."

"I'll hev the parson hyer; yes, an' I'll hev the proof you want."

"I'll be ready!"

There was no more to say, yet he found it hard to go away. He lingered, but not with the look of a lover on his face. Instead, he scowled his suspicion and looked like a pirate about to send a victim to the grave. Even his visit had an end, however, and he went out with slow and heavy steps.

He left Zylpha like one with a nightmare removed from her mind and presence. She had controlled herself before, but now she began to shiver like one with the ague.

"Merciful heaven!" she murmured, "what manner of a case is this? What have I heard? What have I said? Yes; and how shall I escape from my danger?"

A footstep in the hall made her shiver again, beset with fear that Ab was coming back. It was a needless alarm, but it sufficed to send her to the window to look after the miner. She saw him going down the street with his peculiar slouchy gait, and she thanked Providence, again, that he was gone. She saw more. Gabe Gall was advancing the opposite way.

Her face flushed.

"My one hope!" she exclaimed.

The Gambolier looked up; he saw her; she motioned to him. It was enough. He turned and came rapidly toward the hotel. He was soon in her presence.

"At your service!" he lightly remarked.

"Sir," Zylpha exclaimed, "are you sincere in your desire to help Leland Sherwin?"

"I am," Gabe calmly replied.

"As much so as I?"

"I think I may say I am."

"Prove it! I have risked all I can risk—even life, itself! What will you risk?"

The question was to the point, and did not fail to receive prompt attention.

"I will risk life, too. That's what I'm here for. What can I do? What have you learned that's new?"

Rapidly Zylpha told of the visit of the miner and what had been said and done.

"Now," she finished, "what does it mean, and what can be done?"

Gabe Gall did not reply. Instead, he fell into thought and was so long silent that she grew impatient.

"What do you think?" she added.

"There is something in it. I am not prepared to say how much. Can it be Ab would betray his own gang?"

Zylpha thought of the evidence of the few days she had been at the ridge hut, and briefly told of Ab's assertion that he was ready to betray his kin and all else for her.

"It may be," the Gambolier mused, without his usual levity. "If Ab knows whereof he speaks, it must be because he has been close to the secret. If we had time we might get the facts from him in some other way, but as it is, we must use the means which have been so providentially put in our power. You have planned well. Go on, and we'll win on that line."

"But if there should be any miscarriage—"

"Rest easy; I will protect you. Go to whatever place Ab may appoint for his scheme, and doubt not that I will be at hand to protect you. Ab shall not find his bridal pleasant!"

Zylpha shivered. Ab's bridal! The idea frightened her.

"Mr. Gall," she finally said, "you are my only hope. I know you but casually, but you are one who has the appearance of a gentleman. I ask you to remember I am a friendless woman, and place myself in your care. All rests with you!"

"Miss Mayne," the Gambolier returned, promptly, and with no sign of his old frivolity, "put your trust in me without reservation. I am interested in this case, myself, and may be able to make more out of it than now looks possible. Follow Ab's directions, as long as they are within gunshot of reason. If they cross the line, let me know at once, and I fancy I shall understand how to act."

Zylpha began to feel more confidence. With the disappearance of Gabe's levity he seemed to come forth as an entirely new man, and his air of quiet power surprised her.

He soon went away. It was but a little later when a messenger brought her a note. She opened it with some curiosity, but this gave place to other feelings when she saw the name signed to it.

This was the communication:

"MISS MAYNE:—The old saying is to the effect that it's better late than never. I am not sure it applies to this case. I think it does not. I feel that I am doing injustice all around to write this, but it may be my last chance.

"Since I have been here I have been engaged in thought. It has brought me no satisfaction, but much of remorse. It is late—too late, I feel—for a man to repent when he is in trouble. I expect to be so regarded by you, but I ask you to receive this note with a degree of consideration, even if you can give none to the writer.

"I desire to refer briefly to the past. What that has been I need not remind, nor what I have done. You know I took a certain course in certain matters. I believed you had erred. What did I do? I closed my ears to all evidence; I would not hear you; I would not be convinced or willing to believe.

"Looking back, now, I can see I have done wrong. One wrong does not right another. Did I imagine it did? I don't know. I only know what course I took.

"I do not now intend to add to my mistakes by rushing to the opposite extreme, but allow me to say that I feel I have done wrong and injustice. I should have heard you.

"Until one can atone he had better not apologize too freely. I will only say, here, that I regret my errors and humble myself before you.

"When you came to Shadow Shaft I was in trouble. In a measure it influenced my course toward you, as it did all my other actions. I have been curt, ungracious and surly. Even my own sister has in a way felt my lack of civility. I have not been myself. Instead, I have acted the brute to many, and especially to you.

"The time may come when I will ask your pardon—I feel too mean to do it now. One does not care to see an ill-favored cur stalk at his heels, when an honest watch-dog would be welcome.

"In conclusion, I am charged with crime. I can not see the end. It may be the very worst, but hear me when I swear I am innocent of doing harm to any man, be it Philemon Bond or some one else.

"LELAND SHERWIN."

CHAPTER XXXV.

A SECRET SOLVED.

WHEN Arad Huse was informed that he was to be set free he was awakened from sound sleep to receive the information. He sprang up and looked around with a shadow of doubt on his face. Then he decided he was not to be the victim of any joke and grew surly.

"Et ought ter hev come before!" he growled. "Yes; an' I ought never ter hev been shut up, by durnation! I didn't deserve it, an' thar was them who did. Go? Wal, you bet I'll get out!"

Thus far he had been sitting on the edge of the bed. Now he leaped to the floor, but at once paused and gazed down at his feet.

"By durn!" he growled.

Then he raised up his foot. Ever since he so nearly lost the celebrated pair of boots at his own hut he had kept them on night and day. They were on now, but something was wrong about one of them—the heel was missing.

Awhile he gazed, and then he looked fiercely at those who had been in charge of him.

"Who's played a trick on me?" he demanded. "Who mutilated my boots? It's a durn mean trick!"

Both of the men declared they had not done it, and he was finally forced to believe it.

"Who else has been hyer?" he asked slowly.

"Your brother Dick was in to bring something to Leland Sherwin."

"Dick!"

Arad muttered the word as if light was breaking upon him.

"How could anybody take the heel off your boot without awakening you?" one of the men asked curiously.

But the other man had seen something peculiar, and he stopped and gazed sharply at the place where the heel ought to be but was not.

"What kind of a patent have you got on your boots, anyhow?" he demanded. "How do you fasten them together?"

Arad raised the foot up so the barren heel was distinctly visible. Then he made a discovery. In the part which remained were the marks of several mysterious things not nails, certainly, and he hit upon the correct solution of the mystery. The heel had been held on with screws, and it was by tampering with these the thief had managed to get away with the lacking part so neatly.

He turned quickly to the other foot. Brief survey showed him that this was held together in the ordinary way.

The miner changed color. He could not understand the matter, but it was clear to him that there was a mystery of which he knew nothing. Some one had tried to steal the boot from him. Probably it was Dick. Whoever it was had known there was a something worth stealing, but what was it?

Arad became beset with divers emotions, chief among which was fear. Remembering whence the boots had come to him, the question now interesting him most was:

What had been in the heel?—for that something of value had been there he was sure.

Thoroughly cowed he became in great haste to get out of the lock-up, and this he proceeded to do as soon as he could without attracting attention to his agitation. Limping with his abbreviated heel he made his way through the town toward the west.

He did not at once seek his home, but went along the Rooster Run trail until he reached a point which seemed to be to his liking. There he paused and drew off his boots, after which he flung both over the cliff into Millstone Creek.

"Go it!" he exclaimed. "Go it, an' may the devil take you! I'll never wear another dead man's boots ef I know it, especially ef they're like these. Like 'em? I only wish I knowed what these are like!"

For some time he lingered by the cliff; then turned and walked directly toward his home.

Night again!

Gabe Gall stood near the house of Leland Sherwin. He was on the watch for something, and was not disappointed. Some one left the building and started away toward the north. It was Dreamer Dick.

If the boy's manner had been secret on the previous occasion when Gabe had acted the spy upon him, it was doubly so now. He did not leave the place until he had taken precautions which would surely have defeated any ordinary, or extraordinary, watch. Gabe, however, was resolved not to be defeated on this night, and he kept so far at a distance that Richard's caution was thrown away.

Unlike the other occasion Dick carried no visible package, but the Gambolier was not inclined to back out.

When the boy moved away the watcher moved, too, but not in his track. A different plan the Gambolier had formed for the pursuit, and while Dick hung to the hills, as usual, his opponent took to the Rooster Run trail and moved at a far greater rate of speed.

"It may be a great mistake," he murmured, "but I've tried the sagacious 'fool,' before."

Rapid walking carried him to a point well beyond the Huse cabin, whence he set off across country, himself. He had acted upon the belief that Richard was going to the same place he had visited on the previous night, if he did not have any package, and rather than hazard an open pursuit he had decided to go near where he had lost sight of the youth, and try to locate him in that way.

Gaining the desired point, he waited in due form. Considerable time passed—enough so he began to feel great doubt—but his judgment was finally proved correct.

Along the tangled way came mysterious Richard.

Gabe had received his lesson, and he profited thereby. Dick seemed wholly at ease, but the pursuit was made with all of the Gambolier's skill. Luckily, it was not long. The leader bowed around toward the stage-road, and finally brought up at a wild and uncanny place. Rocks were piled up in endless confusion.

There Dick vanished so suddenly that Gabe thought he had again lost him, but as he looked more sharply he discovered a peculiar state of affairs.

The light was strong enough so he could see that these rocks had been converted into a kind of stone house. Being mainly flat, the laborer had not met with so very much trouble. The result was something like a habitation, and as Gabe remembered certain things, he struck a theory which made him eager to see the interior of the place.

The opening was like a tunnel, and everything at first appeared to be darkness beyond, but the sound of voices encouraged him to investigate. He went on, and the gleam of a light soon attracted his attention.

A little further and the scene was before him in due form.

A rocky recess; a lantern dimly burning; Richard standing over a man who lay on a bed.

of rude style—a man pale of face and emaciated. Gabe did not know him, but he listened eagerly to the conversation going on.

"Is there no news?" asked the unknown man, feebly.

In a matter-of-fact way Dick replied:

"I've brought you that."

"That" referred to a boot-heel, which he extended.

"Give it here!" cried the stranger, excitedly.

Dick obeyed, and the unknown, despite his weakness, quickly managed in some way to divide it. As he did so he let drop a little package which came from the interior. He held it up in triumph, and exclaimed:

"Victory, at last! How did you get it?"

"Took it off the boot of the man who wore it," calmly responded the youth. "Many a time I've tried, but never could I succeed until now. Those boots have troubled me sorely, but the interest of mystery kept me going. I hope you are satisfied, sir?"

"Satisfied! Do you know what is in this roll?"

"Money, you said."

"Have you not counted it?"

"No. It wasn't mine—what have I to do with it?" asked Dick, in surprise.

The unknown did not answer. He was doing the counting, and the result seemed to please him.

"All here," he announced. "And that fellow has been wearing the boots all the while?"

"Yes, sir. They have not been off his feet many times since he got them, I assure you."

"Wait until I get able to see him! That will be soon. You have argued all along that I should stay here until I was well enough to fight my own battles. Well, I am nearly in that condition now, so let it be understood I am soon to see my would-be murderer. The scoundrel! It was a cowardly piece of work he did. Struck me down like the cur he is, and then threw me to the waters of the creek. Ah! but old Job Joy will get square with him yet!"

"I'll help you, my good soul!"

Coolly Gabe Gall emerged from cover and stood before the speakers. His manner was airy, but he did not feel so careless as he pretended. He looked sharply at Dick Huse.

The bug-hunter was shocked. The fact was visible in every way, and he did not succeed in regaining his composure easily.

"Richard, you are a corker!" declared Gabe. "Why in thunder didn't you tell us you had Job Joy under your protection? Here we've mourned him as dead, and all the while you've been feeding him Sherwin's food without any financial return. Yes, and Zylpha Mayne has been thinking her light had gone out with him. Richard, you are too wise a fool to suit my taste!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AB HUSE'S BRIDAL.

RUTH SHERWIN was standing in an attitude of deep dejection. The morning sun was shining with all its brightness, and it seemed that every one's spirits ought to be in keeping with the day, but such was not the case with her.

To her side came Gabe Gall. Of late, his airy, careless smile had faded, and there was not a trace of it now.

"Miss Sherwin, you look to be in trouble," he remarked, in a low voice.

"I am in trouble," she confessed.

"I saw Arad Huse call here, just now."

"Yes," she exclaimed, bitterly. "This is the result of setting him at liberty. My brother, an honest man, languishes in jail, while this infamous wretch is set free to annoy others."

"Has he spoken again of his claim to your hand?"

"That is just what he was here for."

"It has dispirited you?"

"Mr. Gall, I fear that man as I do the Evil One. He aspires to my hand. Think of it!—think of it!"

Ruth's manner showed how sincere her misery was, and the Gambolier's face took on a more sympathetic expression.

"The fellow is a scoundrel, surely, but I assure you that you need be under no fear. At present you are deprived of the aid and protection of your brother, but do not think you are friendless. There are those who will see that you do not suffer at the hands of Arad Huse. I assure you there is no danger."

"Perhaps you do not realize how much you are promising!" she hesitatingly returned.

"I think I realize fully. Miss Sherwin, you have seen in me only a happy-go-lucky, impertinent fellow who seemed to have no more to do than to kill time. I ask you to now think of me as something more than a drone in the hive of life, and I will try to prove it. It will be easier to convince you than your brother, but I do not despair of making him understand it, too."

"I assure you I have not thought you 'impertinent.'"

"Leland would hardly agree with you," answered Gabe, dryly. "He has no cause, just now, to regard me as an angel, even in the rough. When I came to Shadow Shaft there were reasons why I acted a part not in keeping

with my real character. The reasons are fast disappearing, and will soon be gone. Until I explain what I mean, kindly withhold judgment on me, and wait for the relief which is sure to follow. Do not be afraid of Arad Huse. He is bold and defiant now, but his powers of mischief are not half what he thinks them. They will soon be gone utterly."

Ruth regarded the speaker with keenest interest. He seemed to have become an entirely different person, while his assurances of safety raised hopes which she had not felt for some time.

Gabe suddenly spoke again:

"Do not look around, but we have a watcher at a distance. That good soul, Dorcas Bright-eye Huse, has her attention on us. She would be glad to know what we are saying, but I see no way to satisfy her."

Ruth was wise enough not to betray by look that Gabe had seen the housekeeper, and the latter was left ignorant of the fact. The Gambolier, however, let nothing pass. The cooker of food was alert, but she had her match in at least one man.

Gabe did not linger with Ruth, but went to his own room.

There he took from his pocket a letter he had just received from Zylpha Mayne and read it attentively.

"To-night!" he murmured. "That suits me—I'll be there!"

The night had come. It fell darkly, making gloom for more than one person, and seeming a fit occasion for like deeds. Several things of interest marked the beginning of the evening.

First of all, a rider came over the ridge, along the Rooster Run trail, and neared the town. There he was met by another man. The latter was Ab Huse. He took the rider in charge and conducted him to a house at the outskirts of the place, though not the house where the Cast-off Crew lived.

Later, Ab went to the hotel. He did not go his usual road—that to the bar-room—but to the parlor. There he found Zylpha awaiting him. As the two faced each other no one would have supposed a bridal was in contemplation. She was pale-faced and anxious, while he was a living scowl. An ugly face Ab bore for one who intended to take a wife to himself that night.

"Wal, you're hyer!" he abruptly began.

"I am here," she confessed, almost inaudibly.

"You say it as ef you're happy!" he sneered.

"What do you expect?" she could not help answering, in despair.

"I don't expect you ter look like a funeral!"

"You don't appear wholly happy."

"How can I, when you act so? You don't use me right. Ef you ain't satisfied to do as you've agreed, say so an' I'll do another thing I hev in mind."

Ab was ugly, and Zylpha saw she had made a mistake. She rallied as far as possible, and tried to put the ruffian at ease as much as she could. In this she partially succeeded, and they left the hotel.

Few words were said on the way, for neither was in a mood to converse, and in this frame of mind they went to the house to which Ab had previously conducted the man who had come along the Rooster Run trail. Zylpha was ushered into his presence.

She saw a person in a dress of ministerial character, but there his likeness to the sacred profession ended. If she had been in earnest on this occasion she might well have wondered if he ever had been a minister, but as she was lost, anyhow, if Gabe did not come to her rescue, it mattered little whether the person had the rank he claimed.

Little time was lost. The stranger had a few hypocritical words to say, but Ab cut him short. The miner was eager to win his prize.

The man and woman of the house had been pressed into service and were to be the witnesses. Zylpha and Ab stood up, and the others took place beside them.

The minister opened a book and began the ceremony. Zylpha's heart was like lead. Where was Gabe Gall? Would he be on time, or had she sacrificed herself in vain?

There was a sound at the front of the house, and the door was suddenly burst open. An angry voice rung out:

"Stop that monkey business, right there!"

And Arad and Lute Huse stood before the bridal party.

It needed no great time to seize upon the situation. From the first the other brother had disapproved of Ab's fancy, and their scowls, now, spoke plainly.

"Ef you're a parson," added Arad, "you kin git up an' git as soon as you please. Thar ain't no job fer you hyer; thar won't be no weddin'!"

Ab Huse's face flushed red.

"What do ye mean by interferin' hyer?" he demanded.

He had more to say, for his blood was surging as hot as that of his kindred, but Arad broke in upon him:

"I mean you are ter let up on this whole business. You know our minds about that gal, an' you ought ter know no sech monkey work won't go. We kin see now who come ter the house an' took her away—"

"I never did!" cried Ab.

"You're a liar! You are the one; you was sweet on her from the start, an' I always said thar was a traitor in it. Dick has been suspected, but it's now clear 'twas you. Et won't go; don't you think it will. Parson, git out!"

He drew a revolver and leveled at the man with the book.

Ab was furious.

"Do you mean all that?" he demanded, in a voice almost inaudible with passion.

"Yes, an' more!" Arad retorted. "This has got to stop. You can't marry the gal, an' as fer the parson, he kin git out or he'll git a bullet in his head!"

"I brought him hyer," shouted Ab, "an' I'll take keer o' him. The man who interferes will git his last hurt!"

Lute, too, drew a revolver.

"You'll hev ter give Ab his share," he declared.

"Yes, an' we'll do it. Shoot him ef he kicks on us!"

The weapons were turned upon Ab.

"Do you mean that?" he asked, huskily.

"We do, that. You can't marry her. You'll abide by our orders or die!"

"This is my answer!"

Like a flash, Ab, himself, drew a revolver, and the thing began to crack before Zylpha had time to realize it. After that all was like a nightmare. Never could she describe the events which ensued. She heard repeated reports, and knew all the brothers were taking part in the work; she saw one or more fall; but her eyesight seemed to fail, and she was faint and dizzy. Then she was conscious that some one was carrying her out of the house—who, she knew not. Then she swooned.

Inside, there was a scene she was mercifully spared from viewing.

A party of men were there who had not taken share in the first of the fight, and Gabe Gall and Sheriff Green seemed to be the chief among them. But the Huse brothers were no longer active. Ab had disappeared, though not until his mark was made.

Arad and Lute had both fallen under his deadly aim.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TOLD UNDER OATH.

LELAND SHERWIN was alone in his cell. The door opened and Gabe Gall entered. The banker knew of no reason why he should be glad to see the voluble man from Great Hump, and his expression was not one to encourage the visitor.

Gabe, however, had never been more at ease. He did not seem to fear the result of his call, though his manner was not the old, audacious one that had troubled Leland so much.

"Mr. Sherwin," he quietly remarked, "permit me to say I am not here in any minor capacity, nor to trouble you. Your sister is outside to see you, and with her is another lady. Her name is Zylpha Mayne. Whether you see her depends wholly upon yourself. She will come or stay out, as you wish. Before you decide, they request me to make certain explanations to you."

The speaker paused. Leland made a gesture which did not have much of encouragement.

He thought he knew Gabe well and had nothing good to expect from him, but was not so placed that he could act as he wished.

"Certain things have occurred outside," Gabe went on. "First, Job Joy has been found alive, and the money he tried to take from Miss Mayne to you has been recovered by Dreamer Dick."

"Next, Arad Huse is dead and his brother Lute is but little better off. Their downfall has led to strange revelations, and the result is that I announce to you that you will soon be liberated, free from any stain. Philemon Bond is dead, but the real slayer is known, and Bond will not be mourned for to any great extent when more is known of his character. What I mean by this will be explained to you by your sister, for I do not wish to force my company upon you until you know more of the facts and see I am not as black as circumstances have painted me."

"I will say, however, that when I came to Shadow Shaft it was not to annoy or persecute you, and that all I have done, unpleasant as it certainly has been, was in a good cause."

"I am a detective, and I came to investigate rumors in regard to Philemon Bond. When I arrived I assumed a certain character calculated to keep my real character secret, and when events progressed I had no choice but to hang to it or give up my work."

"I submit that no detective would do that, and I think the deception justified in a measure. Still, I have been disagreeable to you, and for that I beg your pardon. Do not say, now, whether you will forgive me, but if you can do this in the future I shall be glad to have you tell me."

"In conclusion, I will let Miss Sherwin give you the details."

Turning, without awaiting a reply, Gabe left the cell.

Two hours later Leland left the place in company with Ruth and Zylpha.

SWORN STATEMENT OF GABE GALL.

"I, Philip Lawrence, detective, was a short time ago employed by the Consolidated Banking Company to investigate the conduct of one of their agents, Philemon Bond. They had reason to believe his honesty was open to suspicion, and they wished the matter definitely settled, if possible. I went from town to town until I arrived at Shadow Shaft. There I found that Bond had mysteriously disappeared.

"From the first in this work, I had assumed the character of an idle, though well-dressed vagabond, and called myself Gabe Gall, and it was in this rôle I entered and continued in Shadow Shaft.

"As soon as I got well under way I found so many complications in the case that I labored under great disadvantages. I knew not whom to trust, for suspicion seemed to center on all, so I could trust no one and had to keep my secret character at all times. This made my task hard, and, as I have reason to know, perplexed all whom I met.

"Working under these circumstances, I have done what you asked of me, and more. The results may be seen in the other statements I append.

"Respectfully,
"PHILIP M. LAWRENCE."

STATEMENT OF WARD FEARING.

"Being aware that this paper may be used against me at my trial, I nevertheless swear as follows:

"The firm of Sherwin & Fearing being hard-pressed for ready money, I urged and prevailed upon my partner, Leland Sherwin, to consent to the misappropriation of funds belonging to our employers, to tide us over the difficulty. We took the money, but it was swept away without any good to us.

"When Philemon Bond came to Shadow Shaft ruin stared us in the face, and especially me, for there was evidence to be found that I was more guilty than Sherwin. Bond disappeared, and this is the way of it:

"After dark I went to the vicinity of Sherwin's house, being too nervous to remain quiet. Arriving there, I saw a light burning in Bond's room, but it was soon extinguished and he came out. This surprised me, but, as I did not wish to see him, I kept out of sight. What followed was even more surprising. He went away, and I went after him.

"Bond was soon beyond the town, and great was my surprise when I saw him go toward that part of the hills where man rarely went at all, as it was one barren of gold. Interest kept me in pursuit, and I was led on rod by rod.

"The leader did not seem to see me, and so for a half-hour he did not. When I was discovered, he had laid his plan to entrap me, and succeeded to a charm. Having lost sight of him for a moment, I passed a point of rock and suddenly found him face to face with me.

"He accosted me roughly and with words of threat and anger. He was not clear enough for me to understand, then, just what angered him so much, and I only understood that he was in a rage because he had been followed.

"He wound up by making a violent attack on me with the knife he held. I grappled with him. I was younger than he, and partially overcame him. We fell to the ground, and he lay quiet after that. I found the knife had pierced his body, and believed a fatal wound had been inflicted.

"Horried and frightened, I fled and made my way to the town as soon as possible. Bond did not come back, and I regarded myself as his slayer. I was in terror, but I took no one into my confidence. While others wondered where Bond was, I joined in their expressions, but not with sincerity.

"I had nothing of which to repent. I had acted in self-defense, and the death of the agent removed a man dangerous to me. I felt glad he was dead, yet afraid to have it known. I could not prove the self-defense part, and expected to get the worst if the body was found.

"Later, it was found, and I could hardly hide my terror. I lost my head. I think I was temporarily mad. I told a lie about Leland Sherwin which brought him under suspicion and to arrest. I now retract all I said. Mr. Sherwin never spoke to me about 'removing' Bond, or hinted at it. My story was all false—told, I am sure, in the madness of personal fear.

"WARD O. FEARING."

DYING CONFESSION OF LUTHER HUSE.

"ON the night when Philemon Bond disappeared I was in the hills north of Shadow Shaft. I had stolen a certain article and taken it there to secrete it, but it is not of that I would speak.

"Returning, I came upon a man lying senseless by the brook. It was Bond. I found a knife-wound in his body, and a bruise on his head. The latter was the result of a fall on a stone, and, as I afterward found, he had no fatal hurt.

"I did not wait to learn this, then, but, seeing a watch and other valuables upon him, I set out to rob him of all. I was thus occupied when he

recovered consciousness and recognized me. He seized me, and I yielded to the impulse of self-preservation and attacked him furiously. When it was over he was dead. This is the true story of how Bond died.

"I did not bury the body, and, later, my brother Arad found it, and it played an important part in the scenes at the town.

"This is the whole truth.
"LUTHER HUSE."

FINAL WORDS BY GABE GALL.

"When Philemon Bond came to Shadow Shaft he knew his career with the Consolidated Banking Company was about ended. He had been dishonest in his dealings with them, and was aware that justice was on his track. There is abundant proof that he felt he must act at once.

"He did so. He planned to disappear and leave no trace behind. He preferred to have people think he had met with foul play. To this end he left a part of his clothing in Sherwin's house, as if he had not gone naturally. He also took his coat, cut a rent in it, and, when outside, hid it clumsily among the rocks, where Dick Huse afterward found it. It is curious that, an hour later, he met with exactly the same fate he had planned to have others wrongly believe was his.

"Willing to have suspicion rest upon Sherwin, he left there a paper—which I afterward found—telling that he suspected the firm of Sherwin & Fearing of crookedness. Whether he really had any idea of the kind I know not.

"While he was preparing to leave the house he was heard in his room by Richard Huse. The latter tells of queer sounds made by Bond. Clearly, the latter could not have been in good spirits, at that time. He may have groaned; he may have made some racket by accident. Dick heard him and spoke to him from outside the door. Evidently trying to assume Sherwin's voice, he replied: 'Go away, fool!' Dick went.

"Before leaving Sherwin's, Bond appropriated his host's revolver and knife. Both were by him when he died. Somehow, Lute Huse overlooked the latter, but the revolver he found and hid in a recess in the rocks whence it was afterward recovered by me.

"In explaining Bond's movements I have assumed much as true which can never be proven, since he is dead, but that I have argued correctly is undoubtedly true."

Once more there was peace at Shadow Shaft. Leland was out of prison and proved innocent. His house was a general gathering place, and among those there were Job Joy and Zylpha Mayne.

No one was told exactly what had been the old trouble between Miss Mayne and Leland. That it was a lover's quarrel Ruth was well aware, and it was likely both had been to blame. Now, all was settled, and in the clearing up of the matter both were beset with humiliation which the other took pains to soothe.

Dreamer Dick gained fresh reputation for oddity, since he had taken care of Job Joy when the latter was wounded by Arad, and nursed him back to health without a word to any one, and evading the sick man's requests to have some one else brought to him.

Richard was voted more foolish than ever by some, while others, knowing of certain things he had done, were aware he was anything but that. Eccentric he was, but foolish—never!

Leland and Gabe had a long talk, and when it was over they came forth as good friends. If the former had not been inclined to forgive Gabe as a detective, he certainly would in view of his work, which had rounded off all of the rough corners and made relief quick and sure when all seemed lost.

Arad and Lute Huse were buried in one grave at Shadow Shaft. Amazon Moll left town vowing to find and kill Ab, and then Dorcas suddenly vanished. It was learned afterward that both women found Ab; that Moll did try to slay him, but was prevented by an accident which saved the miner and took her own life; and that Ab and his mother then settled down together, but neither was seen any more at Shadow Shaft.

Dreamer Dick remained with his friends, the Sherwins, and has really acquired quite a reputation as a naturalist. Those who once thought him foolish, look with envy on the money he is making.

Zylpha's own money went from Job Joy's boot-heel to help Leland, and, with Gabe's aid, all troubles between Sherwin and the Consolidated Company were settled privately and quietly. Even Fearing escaped prosecution, but he was glad to accept Leland's hint and get out of town promptly.

Somehow, it took Gabe Gall a long time to settle all these things, and it was singular that, in the course of settlement, he seemed to find it necessary to talk mostly with Ruth, while Leland did his own part by conversing with Zylpha.

Why this was necessary, only a detective could tell, of course, though the humblest of men know ladies are good diplomats.

Perhaps it was all diplomacy, too, but when, some months later, Ruth became the wife of the ex-Gambolier, and Zylpha married Leland, there were some who claimed to have seen it from the first.

THE END.

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